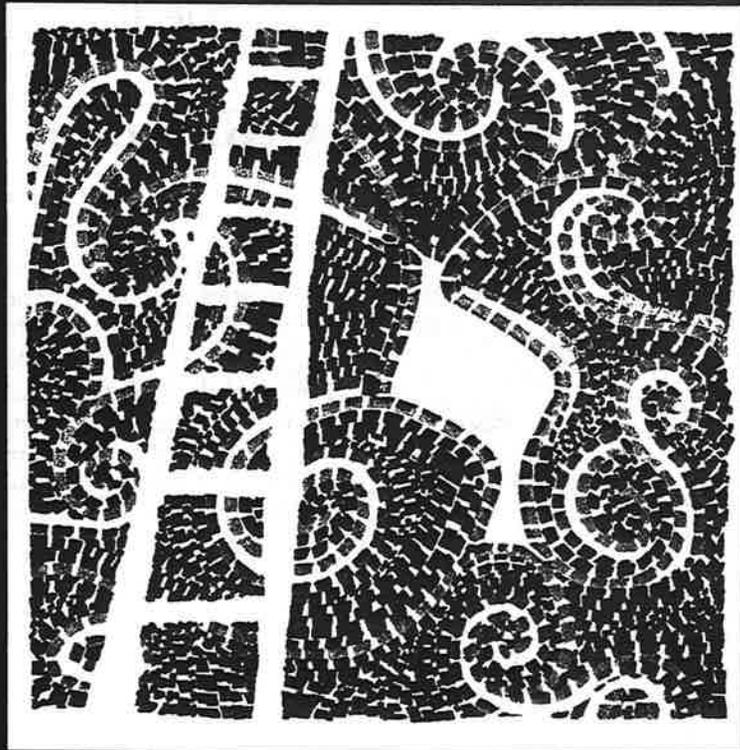


GOD was
in
this **PLACE**
& **I**, **i** did not
know

Finding SELF, SPIRITUALITY



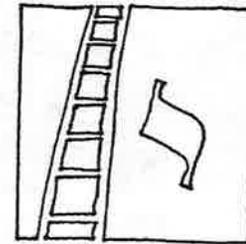
and ULTIMATE MEANING

LAWRENCE KUSHNER

אכן יש ה' במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי

*If I had known God was here,
I wouldn't have gone to sleep*

1 / RASHI



AWARENESS

The Hebrew word for angel, *malach*, also means messenger. Sometimes the messengers are ethereal and translucent; other times they are ordinary human beings. Rabbinic tradition views the angelic ones with suspicion. They are often portrayed as jealous of their younger human siblings. One midrash tells how they tried to dissuade God from making people. Another legend observes that while angels stand still, human beings, curious and unsure, ever move

Rashi
Troyes, France
1040-1105.

Tried to
dissuade God
Midrash
Genesis Rabba
8.5.

Static truth
Aharon Yaakov
Greenberg, ed.,
Itturay Torah
(Tel Aviv:
Yavneh
Publishing,
1976) vol. IV,
154-55
(Hebrew).

along. If you are suspicious of static truth, better to put your trust in human angels.

One of these messengers "going up and coming down" on the ladder was born in the middle of the eleventh century, in the northern French city of Troyes; his name was Rabbi Shelomo ben Yitzhaki. He is better known by the acronym formed from the initials of his name, Rashi. He wrote such a concise commentary about the literal meaning of the words in the Five Books of Moses that it was the first Hebrew book to be printed mechanically, even before the Bible. Indeed, Rashi's *payroosh*, or commentary, is so clear and so accessible that for centuries it appeared routinely on the same page as the biblical text itself.

**Even before
the Bible**
Edward L.
Greenstein,
"Medieval Bible
Commentaries."
*Back to the
Sources:
Reading the
Classic Jewish
Texts*, ed. Barry
W. Holtz (New
York: Summit
Books, 1984)
228.

Rashi's impact on the Jewish understanding of scripture is enormous. For more than a millennium, Jewish school children have read the Torah through Rashi's eyes. This is the first step, so it is only sensible to begin our inquiry with Rashi's commentary.

He was a thorough man with (I imagine) a thick crop of brushed black hair, a humble and relentless pedant. Like his life work, everything was straightforward. And while he may not have been much fun at dinner parties, to study in his class must have been thrilling. From Rashi you learned how to do again what you hadn't done since you were a small child: pay close attention to the obvious.

"When you look closely and for a long time, you discover things that are invisible to others. Most people make the mistake of trying to 'look deeper' when all they need is to pay attention to the obvious. Ask yourself, What are the words? What is their order? Review, again and again, the simple

elements of the story. Then you will understand." Rashi stopped to relight his pipe.

"All right," answered Jacob. "My story is that I'm running away from a very strange family."

"To call them 'strange' is already an attempt to sound psychologically sophisticated. Let the words of the story speak for themselves."

"I am running away from my family and I went to sleep."

"Better. And who is the story about?"

"It's about me."

"Excellent. The story is literally the text of your life. You need not try to be profound. When you examine it closely, you will discover yourself and all the profundity you need."

The eastern sky was already bright orange with sunrise; Jacob could begin to see the purple shapes of the mountains on the horizon.

ADDRESSED PERSONALLY

There is an old Hasidic story, recounted by Martin Buber, of the disciples who gathered to learn from their *rebbe*, the Baal Shem Tov. After the evening prayers, the master would go to his room where candles would be lit and "the mysterious Book of Creation" lay open on the table. All those seeking advice from the Baal Shem were then admitted in a group to hear their teacher, who would speak late into the night.

One evening as the students left the room, one apologized to the others for monopolizing so much of the Baal Shem's attention. Throughout the entire audience, the master had spoken to him personally. His friend told him not to

talk such nonsense. They had all entered the room together and, from the very beginning, the master had spoken only to him. A third, hearing this, laughed and said that they both were mistaken, for their teacher had carried on an intimate conversation with him alone for the entire evening. A fourth and a fifth made the same claim—that the Baal Shem had spoken to them personally, to the exclusion of everyone else. Only then did they realize what had happened, and all fell silent.

All fell silent
Martin Buber,
*Tales of the
Hasidim: The
Early Masters*,
trans.

Olga Marx
(New York:
Schocken,
1947) 55.

The text
are one
Harold Bloom,
*Kabbalah and
Criticism*,
(New York:
Continuum,
1983) 125.

So it is with us when we read scripture. The biblical text speaks intimately and demands an intensely personal response. As Harold Bloom has said of reading "strong poetry," the interpretation evoked "insist[s] upon itself . . . it and the text are one." Because the words of the poem speak only to me, I am not free to comment dispassionately on them, for I am in them. They are me. What you say of the poem, you say of me.

FIRE WITHOUT FLAME

There is a similar intensity of attention when Moses encounters God at the bush.

Moses was tending the flock . . . beyond the wilderness and he came to the mountain of God, Horeb. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in the heart of a flame from inside a bush. And he looked and behold the bush burned in fire yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside now so that I can see this awesome sight: Why is the bush not consumed." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him from within the bush.

From with-
in the bush
Exodus 3:1-4.

The story is customarily offered as a "miracle" that God performed to get Moses' attention. This fails to explain why God, who could split the sea, fashion pillars of fire, and make the sun stand still would resort to something so trivial and undramatic to attract Moses' attention as to make a bush burn without being consumed. It is a cheap trick.

Look more closely at the process of combustion. How long would you have to watch wood burn before you could know whether or not it actually was being consumed? Even dry kindling wood is not burned up for several minutes. This then would mean that Moses would have had to watch the "amazing sight" closely for several minutes before he could possibly know there even was a miracle to watch! (The producers of television commercials, who have a lot invested in knowing the span of human visual attention, seem to agree that one minute is our outer limit.)

The "burning bush" was not a miracle. It was a test. God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could pay attention to something for more than a few minutes. When Moses did, God spoke. The trick is to pay attention to what is going on around you long enough to behold the miracle without falling asleep. There is another world, right here within this one, whenever we pay attention.

SIMPLE READINGS

Jacob was waking up. Confused by the wilderness in which he found himself, shaken by the dream's power, and frightened by the message, he wipes the thickness from his eyes and whispers, "Wow! God really must have been right here, in this place, and I, I did not know!"

Gone to sleep

The source of all ritual impurity is death. Thus anything that might have made life but did not, such as menstrual blood or semen, is ritually defiling. At Sinai the people of Israel may have remained awake all night and kept distant from the opposite sex as a precaution against inadvertently becoming impure. Rashi's comment also reflects his own traditional concern with purity. Had Jacob known it was a holy place, he would have remained awake all night. For moderns, awareness may be all that remains of ritual purity.

Commentary on Rashi's commentary
Shabbetai ben Joseph Bass,
Sifte

Chachamim
(Frankfort on Main, 1712).
An anthology of other super-commentaries.

Rashi's comment, as it appears beneath the boldfaced, over-sized Hebrew text of the traditional *Mikraot Gedolot*, or study Bible, demonstrates the power of paying meticulous attention to the words before us. What Jacob means is so obvious, it is almost comical, says Rashi: "If I had known [that God would have been here], I wouldn't have gone to sleep in such a holy place!" Or, as the commentary on Rashi's commentary, *Sifte Chachamim*, explains, we may assume that Jacob said what he said because he must have learned something about being asleep. "Otherwise . . . what difference would it make to him if he didn't know [that God had been there]?"

The beginning of knowing about God, in other words, is simply paying attention, being fully present where you are, or as Rashi suggests, waking up. We realize, like Jacob, that we have been asleep. We do not see what is happening all around us. For most of us, most of the time, the lights are on but nobody's home.

Right now, for instance, you are a reader. You are consuming these words and the ideas they bear. But suppose you were a typographer, then you would also notice the shapes of the letters. Suppose you were a poet. A paper manufacturer. A blind person. A composer. We find what we seek. And we seek who we are.

OBLIVIOUS to MIRACLES

Jewish tradition says that the splitting of the Red Sea was the greatest miracle ever performed. It was so extraordinary that on that day even a common servant beheld more than all the miracles beheld by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel combined. And yet we have one midrash that mentions two

Israelites, Reuven and Shimon, who had a different experience.

Apparently the bottom of the sea, though safe to walk on, was not completely dry but a little muddy, like a beach at low tide. Reuven stepped into it and curled his lip. "What is this muck?"

Shimon scowled, "There's mud all over the place!"

"This is just like the slime pits of Egypt!" replied Reuven.

"What's the difference?" complained Shimon. "Mud here, mud there; it's all the same."

And so it went for the two of them, grumbling all the way across the bottom of the sea. And, because they never once looked up, they never understood why on the distant shore everyone else was singing songs of praise. For Reuven and Shimon the miracle never happened.

Call it the difference between epistemology and piety. In epistemology if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear, it may or may not make a sound. In piety if a miracle happens and no one notices, it did not happen. Each miracle requires at least one person to experience the miracle, even if, like Jacob, only in retrospect.

Now Jacob begins to ponder the events of his life in a new way. A dimension of what has come to be called "the spiritual" now lies open. "If God was here, and I didn't know, then perhaps God has been other places also."

Y JEWISH SPIRITUALITY?

Classical Hebrew has no word for spirituality. (The modern Hebrew, *ruchaniyut*, comes from our English word.) The English word spiritual means immaterial and connotes

The miracle never happened
Midrash
Exodus Rabba
24.1.

the religious. The concept comes to us with the heavy baggage of early Christianity that divides the universe into material and spiritual. This tradition teaches how to leave this gross, material world and get to the other real, spiritual, and, therefore, holy one.

Judaism sees only one world, which is material and spiritual at the same time. The material world is always potentially spiritual. For Judaism all things—including, and especially, such apparently non-spiritual and grossly material things as garbage, sweat, dirt, and bushes—are not impediments to but dimensions of spirituality. To paraphrase the Psalmist, “The whole world is full of God.” The business of religion is to keep that awesome truth ever before us.

Spirituality is that dimension of living in which we are aware of God’s presence. “It is being concerned with,” in the words of Martin Strelser, “how what we do affects God and how what God does affects us.” It is an ever-present possibility for each individual. Jewish spirituality is about the immediacy of God’s presence everywhere. It is about patience and paying attention, about seeing, feeling, and hearing things that only a moment ago were inaccessible.

INAUDIBLE SCREAMS

I once knew a man who was in psychoanalysis. His doctor’s office was across the street from an old, red-brick, inner-city psychiatric hospital. One day, as he had regularly done for a few years, my friend walked down the street to his car in front of the hospital. Suddenly he heard a blood-chilling scream from the top floor that seemed to sound the deepest pain a soul could possibly feel. This unforgettable noise etched itself into his soul. The following day, back on

the couch, he told his doctor of the scream from the top floor. To his astonishment, his therapist was surprised that he should mention it at all.

“You mean you just now heard it?” asked the doctor. “After all these years? On the top floor across the street, that’s where they put all the screamers.” And from that day on, my friend said, he was able to hear the screams on the top floor almost every time. “The screams are all around us,” he later mused, “waiting for our ears and eyes and hands.”

ULTIMATE AWARENESS

Aldous Huxley, paraphrasing Henri Bergson, once suggested that we are potentially able to be aware of everything.

Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him or her and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful.

Universal consciousness is too much to handle and would burn out the circuitry. In Thoreau’s words, “I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?” We must therefore create an elaborate system of filters, lenses, and blinders to screen out the extraneous images, leaving us with a very small field of vision. What we call consciousness is all that remains visible in this

Aware of everything
Aldous Huxley,
The Doors of Perception
(New York:
Harper & Row,
1954) 22-23.

Looked him
in the face
Henry David
Thoreau, *Walden
and Other
Writings*, ed.
Brooks Atkinson
(New York:
Random House,
1937) 81.

tiny patch of the light of our attention. We can aim it at anything we like, but only a very few things at a time. How we will focus and direct the beam is up to us.

BACKGROUND MUZAK

Eliyahu KiTov, the Orthodox Israeli commentator, poses this problem in classic religious terms. We know that the Torah was given once and for all time at Sinai. Yet the Torah's words are so important that our sages say, "Each and every day the Divine Voice issues from Sinai."

Not only then is Torah eternally unchanging, it is also always present, always able to be heard. Right here and right now, the Holy One of Being is saying the very same words that were said at Sinai. This poses two problems: If Torah is being spoken all the time, then why can't we hear it? And, if Torah is being spoken all the time, what is so special about the revelation at Sinai? KiTov answers both questions with a daring insight into the nature of consciousness.

The reason Sinai is so special and the reason why we are unable to hear Torah all the time, he suggests, is because the noise, static, and muzak of this world drown out the sound of God's voice. Only at the time of the "giving of the Torah" did God "silence the roar." In the language of modern sound-recording technology, God, you might say, switched on the "Dolby" noise reduction system. At Sinai we could hear what had been there (and continues to be here) all along.

God is the One who enables us to hear what is being spoken at the most primary levels of reality. Each act of conscious focus is a miniature Sinai that now can be in every place.

This VERY PLACE

In rabbinic tradition, the Hebrew word for "place," *makom*, is also a name for God. This occasions some fascinating word plays. According to the Midrash,

[When] the brothers of Joseph saw that their father was dead . . . they were afraid. They saw that at the time they were returning from burying their father, Joseph went to offer a blessing at that pit into which [they] . . . had thrown him. And he offered a blessing over it, as one is obligated to do at a place where a miracle has been done for him: "Blessed be the *makom* [the Place? God?] who made a miracle for me in this place."

Likewise, in our story of Jacob's dream, we read that he "came upon the place/*makom*." One midrash, punning on the word *makom*, suggests that it means that Jacob came upon God! Another midrash cites a teaching of Rabbi Huna, who taught in the name of Rabbi Ammi, and makes the misreading into theology:

Why do we change the name of the Holy One, and call God *makom* [the Place]? Because God is the place of the world and not the other way around. Rabbi Jose bar Halafta said: We do not know whether God is the place of the world or whether the world is God's place, but from the verse, "Behold, there is a place with Me," it follows that the Lord is the place of the world, but this world is not God's place.

God, the Holy One of Being, is more than everywhere; God is the bosom in which creation happens day after day, the ground and the source of everything that exists, the very

Miracle
for me
Midrash
Tanhuma ver. A.
Tanhuma 17, end.

Jacob came
upon God
Midrash Pirke
deRabbi Eliezer,
ch. 35.

Place with me
Exodus 33:21.

Not God's
place
Midrash
Genesis Rabba
68.9; Ephraim
E. Urbach, *The
Sages: Their
Concepts and
Beliefs*, trans.
Israel
Abrahams
(Jerusalem:
Magnes Press,
1975) 68-72.

Place of Being itself
 "Why is the name of the Holy One, called *makom*? Because . . . as it is said, 'In every place where I record my name I will come unto you and bless you.'" Exodus 20:24, Midrash *Pirke deRabbi Eliezer*, ch. 35.

There is a place Exodus 33:21

Place of Being itself. And to be awake and present "in this place" is to encounter God. In Rashi's words, as he comments on the verse in Exodus, "On the mountain where I speak with you always, there is a place prepared by Me for your sake where I will hide you so that you will not be injured. From there you will see what you will be permitted to see. This is its simple meaning."

Jacob lay there remembering his father Isaac, and his grandfather Abraham, and the terrible mountain they called Moriah—"the place where God will be seen." According to one rabbinic legend, it was in this same ubiquitous place, unbeknown to Jacob, that he had just had his dream.

BEING PRESENT

You already are where you need to be. You need go nowhere else. Feel it now in the moisture on your tongue. Sense the effortless filling and emptying of your lungs, the involuntary blinking of your eyes. Just an inch or so behind your sternum where your heart beats. That is where the *makom* is. Right here all along and we did not know it because we were fast asleep, here in this very *makom*.

In the panentheism of the Hasidic revival, as Rabbi Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl taught, "All being itself is derived from God and the presence of the Creator is in each created thing." Or in the words of Rabbi Aryeh Lieb of Ger, "A person is able to awaken the holiness of God in any place."

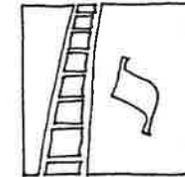
Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotzk (who is on the ladder just behind Rashi) observed that the verse in Exodus seems to be redundant. God says to Moses, "Come up to Me on the

In each created thing
 Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, Upright Practices: The Light of the Eyes, trans. Arthur Green (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) 100.

Awaken the holiness
 Itturay Torah, vol. II, 248.

mountain and be there." If Moses were to ascend the mountain, why would God also bother to specify that he "be there?" Where else would he be? The answer, suggests the Kotzker, is that people often expend great effort in climbing a mountain, but once they get there, they're not there; they're somewhere else.

Jacob looked at Rashi. Years of being a teacher had taught the older man that the most powerful moments of teaching occur when the teacher has enough self-control to remain silent. The slightest noise, even a gesture could ruin everything. Jacob was waking up.



And be there
 Exodus 24:12.

Some-where else
 Itturay Torah, vol. III, 199.