

Between Two Worlds

Kol Nidre 5778/2017

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Ancient Greece must have been magical.

A day before the synagogue refugee mission I wandered the streets of Athens alone. Giants walked these hills. Pericles was here. I stood where he stood. I can see him giving the speeches that stirred Athenians: words still studied by speechmakers. My mind's eye creates a vividness that astonishes me. I hear him. I can almost touch him. What I would give to study oratory with the master.

Athens overflows with antiquities. Everywhere there are reminders of ancient days. There by the modern park is a Roman bath. By the shop on the side street are first century mosaics. By the museum an ancient neighborhood. By the Acropolis an ancient village.

These are antiquities for us, but twenty-five hundred years ago, the Acropolis was not ancient. It was new. The Athenians did not consider themselves the Ancient Greeks. They were Greeks. They lived for the day. We know them, but they did not know us. They did not envision us. They did not give a passing thought that one day far in the distant future, a tourist from a place they could never imagine would climb up the mountain to see the Parthenon. They built the mountain for themselves: to honor the goddess Athena.

Ruins move me. A few rocks, a wall, a pillar from antiquity are enough to seize my imagination. I felt so alive walking the streets of the dead. I created an entire world in my mind: how they looked, how they worked, how they dressed, how they dined, how they talked. It is a bit voyeuristic. We peek into the lives of those who lived thousands of years before without them knowing that we are looking in. It is like Big Brother. Our imagination replaces the hidden cameras.

That is the fascination of ruins: Ruins renew. Ruins restore. Ruins remind that we are not alone. We are part of a continuum. There was life before us. There will be life after us. The past shapes us. We are who we are because they were who they were. In this way, ruins recompense, reimbursement for the shortness of life and reparation for its finality. Ruins respond to our unrequited hunger for meaning and immortality, redeeming the dead, easing our feelings of fleetingness.

People die. It is the law. Pericles died. Socrates died. Hippocrates died. Thucydides died. The strong and the weak; the mighty and the meek: All that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity. Buildings crumble. Pillars fall. The temples collapse. The mightiest civilizations gone with the wind.

It is all so humbling. Gazing at the dust of Ancient Greece, one of our species' most remarkable achievements, I was moved by how moved I was. Here at my feet lay the spokes of the great wheel of life. What an awesome thought: We are not alone. We are in the bloodstream of human existence.

At the Acropolis I saw a Japanese family that had carried an elder up the hill in a wheelchair. They struggled to push the chair over the rocky terrain. It was hot. Thousands of people were on the mountain. Unperturbed, they clanked laboriously from one temple to another. Why the effort, I asked myself. Just see the movie. But seeing the movie won't cut it. You have to be here: to feel the heartbeat of history and the pulse of solidarity that binds all who ever lived; a Japanese woman from the east, an American man from the west, and everyone in-between.

Tourists at the Acropolis behave as tourists do. They were noisy, they trampled on ancient artifacts, they thought mostly of themselves, snapping selfies in the sanctuaries of the gods. Still, I would like to believe that they paid all that money and invested all that effort to lug themselves up the mountain for one faint feeling of liberation: Life is bigger than myself and my selfie. Democracy, philosophy, medicine, theater, so much of Western civilization was born here. I am part of all that I have met. I am inside the flow of time, a participant, a player, not a passerby.

We live between two worlds, the world of the past and the world of the future. The past is infinite. The future is infinite. We live between two infinities.

Ancient ruins take us back as far as we can see, but the past is billions of years older. History is only the last part; the human part, the seam of recognizable time we desperately hold onto like a fragile thread. We view the Acropolis as ancient, but it is less than three thousand years old. The Ancient Greeks could not even see that far back.

One day we will be the ancient Americans. One day, if there is anything left, tourists will visit where we live now: "Here lay the remnants of ancient New York." They will peer over the excavated remains of Grand Central Station and imagine how we looked, how we worked, how we dressed, how we dined, how we talked: how we moved, since trains will be a thing of the past.

And like the Greeks of old, the Americans of the 21st century will constitute only the very last part, the human part, of the past. If humanity survives, our era will merge with all the eras, one time of many times. And even if humanity does not survive, time is eternal, and will continue with or without us.

We are finite, but all around us is infinity. The universe is too big for us. The microscopic, too small. Telescopes are ever more powerful, but we are mostly blind to what lay beyond. Microscopes are ever more powerful, but we are mostly dumb to what lay inside.

We are unable to see the beginning or the end. We have come a long way. We are making great strides. What we know is remarkable. What we will know is inconceivable. But let no one deceive. Let no one pretend. Physicists see practically nothing of what there is to see. Chemists see practically nothing. Software developers see practically nothing. Historians see practically nothing. Politicians see practically nothing. Mental health experts see practically nothing. Self-help masters see practically nothing. Rabbis see practically nothing. Some human beings think they know more than they do; and they tell us what they think they know with considerable confidence. But they know practically nothing of what there is to know. They see hardly at all.

The truly brilliant of our species acknowledged and embraced our limitations. "The most beautiful emotion we can experience," wrote Einstein, "is the mysterious. To sense that beyond everything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reach us only indirectly."

Measured against two eternities, our lives are an imperceptible speck on the space-time continuum. Our three score year and ten, or perhaps four or five score years are as nothing.

It causes despair. We are human, and thus need to know; but because we are human, we can never know enough. We are human, and thus crave certainty; but because we are human, we can never be certain. We are human, and thus seek immortality; but because we are human, we cannot live forever. It might have been better to have been created a lower animal. It is our darned higher consciousness that creates our anxiety. We are constantly asking questions that have no answers. Not knowing is a uniquely human characteristic. After all, the lion chasing the deer doesn't ask itself: "What is my purpose?" And the deer, chased for the umpteenth time by the lion, doesn't ask itself: "why does this always happen to me?"

Life is absurd. "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem," wrote French thinker, Albert Camus, "and that is suicide." It is so French! Since in comparison to infinity the present is infinitesimal, what's the point? Why not just end it all now? Shakespeare put it this way: "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time; and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Religion seeks to address this despair. Theologians and mystics intuit the infinite. "The world-to-come," "messianic times," "heaven," "paradise," – these were concepts that sought to place the present in perspective of eternity, and to give the human species hope. Jewish thinkers, of course, did this too.

However, the mainstream of Jewish thought did not speculate too much about eternity. Mindful that our time on earth is limited, we tended not to ask questions that had no answers. Since we have but a few years, better to focus on what could be answered. And even when the Rabbis engaged in speculation, its purpose or consequence was to affirm the present, the here and now, the world between two worlds.

"For two and half years the schools of Hillel and Shammai debated whether it would have been better not to have been created," the Talmud records. "They finally voted, and concluded that it would have been better had human beings not been created: But since we have been created, let us examine our deeds."

It is such a classically Jewish approach; so down to earth, so basic and so wise. Even if we conclude that life is absurd – it would have been better never to have been born – given that we were born, let us make the most of it. How so? By emphasizing deeds. What have you done? What have you achieved? What will you do? How shall you live? How will you repent for mistakes, transgressions and willful misdeeds?

In essence, Judaism is concerned with behavior. The Sages sought to dignify these few years of our lives: to vest purpose and meaning in the world between two worlds, the tiny space between infinities. The great rabbinic tradition focuses on the individual, who, as the Rabbis say, "is here today and in the grave tomorrow." Its purpose is to create a moral system of behavior that will allow us to derive as much meaning, enjoyment, empowerment and accomplishment as possible.

For the Rabbis, life is a great good gift. Of course they knew about suffering. Of course they knew about illness, cruelty, oppression, brutality, tragedy, and death. In the face of this, they wanted human beings to create; to produce; to enjoy; to live: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you and your offspring will live."

It is the opposite of despair. No matter what, choose life. This world between two worlds has meaning. We inherit the past and seed the future. We are indispensable. Without us, there is no human future.

The Rabbis demanded persistence. Keep trying. Keep getting up. Keep fighting against medical illnesses and social ills. Keep discovering new treatments. Keep inventing new machines that allow longer and better lives. Keep earning so that you can enjoy and be productive. Keep working. Keep doing. Keep improving. Keep repairing. Keep engaging society.

Do not give in. Do not make peace with, or consent to, evil, whether natural or nurtural. Do not acquiesce to droughts, tornadoes, hurricanes, global warming. Discover how to protect yourself. Do not comply with immorality and inhumanity. Fight back. Defiance characterizes the heroic heart. Use every means available, all your capacities, to confront what is wrong and make it right. And when your energy is spent, and your time is done, hand the fight over to the next generation, as we received the torch from those who now sleep in the dust.

Stay humble. Do not bstride the narrow straits like some Colossus. You will lose many of life's battles. You will lose the ultimate battle of mortality. Keep your head high. The struggle against evil, injustice, disease and chaos - the struggle - is what defines human life and determines human meaning. Struggle, with dignity, even when you win, let alone when you lose.

Stay humble. This is the key lesson for our times. We live in an arrogant age. We venerate arrogant people. We emulate boastfulness. We reward conceit. Stay humble: remember who you are and from whence you came. From dust you emerged and to dust will return. We are a speck between two eternities: one millisecond, one breath in the heaving universe.

The Psalmist wrote:

Adam la'hevel dama. "We are like a breath. Our days are like a passing shadow. We come and go like grass, which in the morning shoots up renewed and in the evening fades and withers. We turn to dust. Would that we were wise, that we understood wither we are going. For when we die, we carry nothing with us. Our wealth does not accompany us. Mark the wholehearted and behold the upright. They shall have peace."

Examine your deeds, and you will find peace. You are not the beginning or the end, and those under your feet are as worthy as you. They have equal standing in the sight of God, irrespective of what they earn, what they achieve or what they know. Whatever your accomplishments, you are not superior to others. The Bible tells us that Aaron, the High Priest, himself, would perform the menial task of collecting the ashes of the burnt offerings from the night before.

We are all frail. We are all limited. We are all vulnerable. We are all lost. We are all mortal, flesh and blood. There is no reason to raise yourself above another.

The Bible cautions, do not say to yourself “my own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.” Even if you are talented, and even if you worked harder than others, and even if you earned what you have, there are innumerable factors beyond your control and beyond your powers that contributed to your standing, satisfaction and success. Had you been born in Afghanistan, you would not be who you are. Had you been born in a different era; had you been born a slave in Greece, you would not be who you are.

Each of us is equal before God. We read in the Talmud that “a favorite saying of the rabbis of Yavne was: ‘I am God’s creature and my fellow is God’s creature. My work is in town and his work is in the country. I rise early for my work and he rises early for his work. Just as he does not presume to do my work, so I do not presume to do his work. Will you say that I know a lot and he knows a little so I am better than he? We have been taught: One who brings a large sacrifice and one who brings a meager sacrifice have equal merit, provided they direct their heart to heaven.’”

Direct your heart to heaven. If speaking of God in Heaven makes you uncomfortable, then take a telescope. What do you see in the heavens? Practically nothing. There is infinity out there.

Directing your heart to heaven; accepting your limitations; conceding that there is so much more that you do not know than what you do know: recognizing that the forces of the universe are bigger than you and stronger than you, and will ultimately defeat you: This is the true religious spirit. It is the spirit of wonder, awe, amazement, imagination and humility.

Jewish sages felt that humility is the key virtue that leads to all other virtues. Humility is not weakness or meekness. It is not self-effacement, not lack of ambition, striving, leadership, accomplishment, or success. Jewish sages wanted human beings to “strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.” Achieve. “Whatever is in your power to do, do it with all your might,” Kohelet teaches.

Moses was at one in the same the most accomplished and the most humble of all human beings. God wanted Moses to achieve; but at the moment of his highest achievement, on the pinnacle of God’s mountain, God commands Moses: “Take off your sandals.” “You cannot see My face and live.” We hear only echoes. We see only fragments. Einstein was right: Sublimity reaches us only indirectly. Even for the greatest of us.

Avoid arrogance. Arrogance is not pride in our achievement. Arrogance is pride in our superiority; belief in our infallibility. This is what the author of the Proverbs meant when he wrote, “Pride goes before ruin, arrogance before failure.”

Probably unbeknownst to the writer of the Proverbs, and around the same time, the Greeks also reflected on pride and ruin, arrogance and failure. They, too, thought that hubris – the inability to recognize your own smallness, your place in the cosmos, was the source of evil, sorrow, cruelty, tragedy, immorality and downfall.

I spent an exhilarating hour at the Theater of Dionysus, at the foot of the Acropolis. It was thrilling. Theater was born here. It is as it was; embellished a bit by the Romans, but not substantially changed. There was the stage. There the chorus spoke. There the hill where thousands of Greek families shared drinks, delectables, and drama. Every year the citizens of Athens would gather to revel in the Dionysia – a three-day festival of theater, where the greatest playwrights of the age would compete for top prize. I could feel the festival. I was breathing

the same air as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides: they were here! Their plays staged where I was sitting. Every work of theater since is, in one way or another, connected to this Athenian hill at the foot of the Acropolis.

In 442 BCE Sophocles won first prize of the Dionysia for his play, *Antigone*. We still perform the masterwork. Creon, the King of Thebes, issued an edict banning the burial of Polyneices, who rebelled against the king. Under pain of death, Antigone, Polyneices' sister, defies the decree. She could not allow her brother to lie out in the open, food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field. For her, no earthly king could usurp the eternal law of justice that required burial with dignity.

Antigone is caught and brought before the king. Creon rages:

“You dared defy the law.”

Sophocles puts this immortal response on the lips of Antigone – everlasting words of truth, justice, righteousness, dignity and humility, words of life itself, coming to us from the ancient ruins of the past, breaking the barrier between two worlds, and flowing through us to all human time:

[Your law, king] “was not God’s proclamation.

That final justice that rules the world below makes no such laws.

Your edict, king, was strong. But all your strength is weakness itself against the immortal, unrecorded laws of God.

They are not merely, now: they were, and shall be, operative forever, beyond man utterly.”