

The Seas Do Split: Dancing God's Liberation

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How do you speak about a return to God when you don't remember having ever been with God in the first place? My life was the happy childhood of an atheist in San Francisco and, like most stories, this one won't proceed in a linear fashion. Instead, it will meander up and down main roads and byways, some of them reflecting what appeared to be dominant at the time and sometimes offering glimpses into a potential without precedent that would eventually open a portal leading to an entirely unanticipated possibility.

I am the product of those meanderings, those wanderings, not knowing where I was headed, and the consistent reality that my life thus far has turned out more beautiful and mysterious than I could have possibly scripted on my own. What follows is that story, my story.

It turns out that San Francisco was a perfect city in which to be an atheist. There was so much to do, to see, to participate in! I had the pleasure and the privilege of being from a family that allowed me to take full advantage of the city's many lures. My parents enrolled me in rigorous schools where I received a fine education. I was able to travel with my family, privileged to maintain wonderful friendships, and that happy rootedness is a gift that I carry with me everywhere. I have longed suspected that our origin stories (of having emerged from a pristine garden) really reflect the external narrative of each person's individual emergence from childhood, and subsequent expulsion into adulthood. My personal Eden was by the Bay.

Early Encounters

When I was almost thirteen, my father insisted that I become a Bar Mitzvah, as had every Jewish male in my family since time immemorial. Being a confirmed atheist and knowing that there was nothing (and no one) out there, I thought the preparation and ritual was a waste of time, so I resisted with everything I had. Ultimately I consented to a pretty pro-forma Bar Mitzvah, complete with two separate parties because my parents were embroiled in a really painful and hostile divorce procedure that was to last until I was sixteen. The Bar Mitzvah event didn't mean much to me, although I recognized that it meant something to my Father. It didn't mean much to my Mother, whose Atheism runs deep to this day.

My spiritual autobiography really revs up after that opening salvo. You see, during the time that I was preparing for my Bar Mitzvah, I also developed an illness that has remained with me throughout my life. At the time I didn't know what it was; I just knew that it was both painful and humiliating. At 13, I was a boy emerging into my teen years and early manhood, yet I had these painful oozing lesions in a very private place; something I couldn't discuss and wouldn't share. The pain was so great that I would only defecate every three or four days which led to extremely painful intervals and a lot of bleeding every time I finally had to allow my bodily functions to transpire.

I don't know which was worse, the excruciating pain or the humiliation, but at some point I was caught (meaning, my stained garments revealed my condition to the adults in my home, forcing me to answer their probing questions). Those questions resulted in me being rushed to a Proctologist's office and having the worst two hours of my life until that moment. Strapped in the Proctologist's examination chair with my butt in the air, the doctor probing what were highly private parts, I was in incredible pain, and was mortified with a sense of shame and doom.

Vision Given By Spirit

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says that one must hit rock bottom before being able to let God in. I had descended as far as I could go, and there was God, just in time. In the middle of this two-hour medical exploration (one that was physically painful and felt personally degrading) I experienced a miraculous vision, meaning I saw not with my mind, but with my actual eyes. I *witnessed* Moses and the Children of Israel marching across the split sea to dry land! I *saw* the glory of God leading them in security to freedom, and I was among their throng! The vision was visual, clear, and experiential. Whereas in later years I continue to cherish that vision in my consciousness and my identity, at the time I had no way to relate to it. I had no intellectual or theological framework to think about God or visions, I had no emotional openness to the possibility of participating in miracles or liberation. After all, I had always assumed that being religious was synonymous with stupidity and ignorance. So I did what many of us do with aspects of reality that we don't have a framework to integrate: I just forgot about it and ignored it.

Within the week, the doctor had informed my mother that I had an inoperable terminal cancer. I was rushed to the hospital; my mother moved in with me, and we spent three weeks living in the hospital running a battery of inconclusive tests,

until the specialist noticed that there were also small red bumps on my arms, chest and legs. He linked those bumps to the more egregious wounds down below. After some deft reference checking, he declared that what I had was a disease called Histiocytosis X, a rare viral affliction which can be fatal if it strikes internal organs. Otherwise it is merely painful and disfiguring. Histiocytosis recurs in cycles every several years, with diminishing frequency and intensity until at some point it has either killed its victim or petered out entirely. This was my first round.

Not uncommonly, Histiocytosis X also accompanies a related illness called Diabetes Insipidus. This is not standard diabetes, it entails that the interior lobe of my pituitary gland no longer produces the hormone Vasopressin, one that causes the kidney to re-filter water. Consequently, I spent the early part of my teen years needing to drink voraciously and having to urinate every fifteen or twenty minutes with a constant and unremitting sense of drought. That cycle led itself to teasing from other young teens because of my frequent visit to the men's room, and to my own sense of being marginal or, in some ways, not normal.

The dual diagnosis of Histiocytosis X and Diabetes Insipidus led to a series of medical interventions. I was subjected to rigorous radio- and chemotherapy at the cancer ward of one of the local hospitals (although I didn't let myself notice that it was a cancer ward, the name emblazoned above the entrance notwithstanding). I didn't (at least consciously) notice that everyone in treatment there was a cancer patient. I just didn't allow myself see it because I couldn't admit the reality of cancer to myself. As for the Diabetes Insipidus, the treatment was and is to take a dose of the hormone vasopressin twice daily, which allows my kidneys to re-filter water normally.

In the rush of treatments, doctor's appointments, consultations, my stunning vision of the sea parting, of the children of Israel crossing to freedom, of God and I marching together evaporated. I had no way to internalize, no way to conceive of it. Like many American Jews I embraced my identify as a Jew, but my Jewishness involved a sense of ethnicity, history, intellectual curiosity about the world, and prophetic morality. I had a keen sense that Judaism was adamant about social justice and human dignity, and that imperative constituted the primary legacy of my Jewish heritage. I did not engage in Jewish rituals; I did not engage in prayer or the study of traditional text, nor did I feel the need. I threw myself into my high school, surrounded by friends. High school was a time of blossoming on every

possible level and I felt myself becoming popular, enjoying the company of my peers, loving the learning and sports that I finally could access.

First Fruits

In college, the Histiocytosis X returned, and I again had to endure extensive treatments at the Stanly Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, still oblivious to the fact that I was there because I, too, was a cancer patient.

In college I became religious, and that transformation is worth dwelling upon for a moment. Two of my roommates were pious Christians, and I was puzzled on some level by this because I had grown up with the assumption that religion was a mental deficiency, yet these two people were smart enough to attend Harvard. Indeed both of them have since gone on to enjoy illustrious careers in medicine, one of them in academic medicine. Even more striking to me, though, was that their sweetness and goodness was very much the harvest of their religiosity. One friend, in particular, was and remains among the most compassionate and decent people I have ever met, and that intrigued me. His decency inspired me to consider what it might be to explore taking on religious beliefs and religious commitments myself.

But having been a lifelong atheist, I had no idea how to begin. Here is where, according to some understandings of theology, what transpired might seem providential: the radio host Dennis Prager came to speak on campus, and he delivered an advocacy talk, the title of which was "Proving the Existence of God." Dennis claimed to be able to do just that. I attended his program, but not because I needed someone to prove the existence of God. All I needed was to know that you couldn't *disprove* it; I just didn't want to invest a lot of time and energy and then be shown to have been a complete fool.

There were two undergraduate philosophy students who shredded Prager's arguments, demonstrating conclusively that you simply can't prove the existence of God. But again, that wasn't what I sought. What I needed was to know that you can't *disprove* the existence of God, and they readily conceded that point. Their admission gave me the permission slip I needed to explore whether or not God had a role to play in my life. I scheduled an appointment to speak to the Hillel Rabbi, Ben-Zion Gold. Rabbi Gold was a Holocaust survivor whose entire family had been murdered in the Holocaust. He was a man of prophetic morality, passionate

about human dignity and social justice. He was a great speaker and a deep, deep intellect, vastly literate in Jewish sacred sources and highly idiosyncratic.

I met Rabbi Gold in his book lined study, and I told him that I was uncomfortable even having the conversation, but that I wanted to think about God. Rabbi Gold responded that there is no neutral place from which to think about God. He told me that being a believer involves certain implicit promises, and the only way to explore faith was from the inside: to give oneself to observance and belief, and then to see whether those promises ring true in one's own life.

Rabbi Gold gave me two challenges: He suggested I start attending synagogue services every Sabbath morning stipulating that I had to attend for not less than two months. He explained that attending for less than two months would mean I would spend the whole time focusing on where I sat, who else was present, who people were, and what melodies we were using. He insisted that I needed to attend regularly for at least two months to be able to become sufficiently familiar with the community and the service to assess whether or not this religiosity was doing anything positive for me. The second challenge Rabbi Gold posed was an assignment: to read an anthology of the writings of Franz Rosenzweig.

So a word about Rosenzweig: Franz Rosenzweig was a German Jew raised at the turn of the 20th century. He came from a prominent, wealthy, and assimilated family. His famous cousin had previously converted to Christianity, as had several of the assimilated Jews of Germany, exposed as they were to western culture, its beauty and depth. Rosenzweig decided, being of a philosophical bent, that he wanted to convert in the same way his cousin did: like Jesus, through Judaism. Rosenzweig resolved to enter Christianity through Jewish religion, specifically by attending Yom Kippur services with his parents at their beautiful Berlin Temple and then, the next morning, proceeding to be baptized. His mother, in a remarkable display of religious courage, stood at the door of their temple dressed in her holiday best and refused to allow her son, Franz, into the synagogue. She said to him, "If you want to become a Christian that's your business, but you can't do it through us."

She literally blocked his way into the synagogue and he found himself wandering the streets of Berlin. His grand drama frustrated by his mother's stubborn loyalty to her people and faith, he wandered into a small Hasidic synagogue, simple, unadorned, not ornate in any way, but possessed of a deep authenticity and piety.

He witnessed for the first time in his life people sobbing while they prayed. He witnessed people praying on their own with such depth and fervor as he had never previously seen, and he was utterly and completely transfixed. Rosenzweig resolved that very evening not to convert, but instead to live a life of return, which he called "from the periphery to the center." He established programs and institutions to assist other assimilated Jews to return as well. He organized courses that were lay-led and lay-taught (by such luminaries as Martin Buber and Nahum Glatzer), that were conversational in nature, in which a text was set on the table and everybody had the right to offer their own responses and opinions whether they were learned or not. In launching this bold kind of democratic learning, he created a model which is in use to this day, a hundred years later, allowing people to own their own heritage and to illumine its writings with their own authenticity.

But Rosenzweig's life is no less significant than his thought. He wrote an astonishing book of philosophy called the *Star of Redemption* that transformed Jewish and much of Christian thought in the 20th and 21st Century, but he also developed Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease) and spent his last several years bedridden. By the end of his life, the only way he could write or communicate was by using a wire attached to his finger to point to a letter board held by his wife, Edith. He would indicate one letter at a time, and Edith would transcribe each and every letter, and in that way, allowed him to produce essays and short books up to his dying day. The example of that kind of courage, intellectual vision, the ability to stand up against the dominant norms of one's culture, and to live a life of meaning despite great challenge really captivated and inspired me, as did the community and synagogue services at Hillel. Everything was sung. Instead of a sermon, different congregants volunteered to teach, and those congregants were some of Harvard's best minds: Michael Walter from the political science department, Ben Schwartz from Chinese studies, Hilary Putnam and his wife Anna Putnam from the philosophy department. In those conversations, it was impossible to fear that religion forced a person to surrender either intellectual acuity or moral fervor.

That was my Semester of Love: the semester that I met God was also the season that I met Elana, who 33 years later, remains my beloved wife. That magical period in my life launched a richness of mind and spirit, an openness of heart that altered my life's vector forever.

But the astute reader will have noticed that I haven't referred back to the cancer of my childhood or the miracle of the sea parting because I wasn't consciously aware of it yet. I finished college intending to be a politician. I was active in liberal and progressive causes and took a job as the Legislative Aide to the Speaker of the California State Assembly, immediately after my college graduation. I was a Legislative Aide for two years and I loved the work building community and addressing possibilities for social change. But during those two years it also became clear to me that it was impossible to make new friendships, at least I couldn't figure out a way to do it. It was impossible to have real balance in my life, and it was impossible to honor my relationship with Elana yet to also live the life of a successful politician. It took me about a year to realize I couldn't integrate the life I wanted and still pursue a career in politics, but I didn't have a fallback plan. I had previously mentioned to Elana that it was my intention after retiring as the Senator from California, after a long and glorious career in politics, to then attend Rabbinical School because of my growing love of Judaism and an attendant hunger to learn. Elana was and is a wise woman, and she responded that if I wanted to learn in rabbinical school I should not postpone it until the end of my life, because no one can know what life might bring. She told me I should enroll at once.

Based on her sound advice, I spent a frenetic week applying to rabbinical school, was admitted, and found myself enrolled in New York. Elana attended Columbia Law School while I was attending rabbinical school nearby. The rabbinical school took five years to complete. I loved the learning; I made lifelong friendships there. Then I accepted a job at a congregation in Southern California.

All of this, you will soon see, set the stage for the most significant spiritual awakening thus far.

Harvesting Life; Pruning Faith

I entered the congregational rabbinate, as do I think most young clergy, with a sense that if I smiled enough, loved enough, preached and taught enough, visited enough sickbeds, conducted enough lifecycle events, and was present and tireless, that I would be able to create a spiritual awakening in my congregation. I threw myself at the mission with the energy and the zeal of young clergy, and the first five years of my work in Mission Viejo, California was beautiful and joyous. The congregation grew from 200 families to almost 600 families. There was an influx of young people and young children. We created a dynamism and an excitement in the community that lasted through the week and crescendoed on Sabbaths and

holy days. I was offering adult education classes, teaching the teens, the kids, and the preschoolers, visiting the sick, and conversing with the elderly. It was non-stop work, but it was richly rewarding and my understanding of God powered me through. My theology was conventionally liberal, meaning I accepted a more or less Orthodox vision of God, except I didn't think that God sweated all the details. I was able to sustain that stance until Elana became pregnant with our twins. The twins were born prematurely after a difficult pregnancy fraught with peril. Then, at about 2½ years of age, Jacob was diagnosed with autism.

Hello God: Hitting Rock Bottom (Again)

With that diagnosis, everything changed. I suppose that on an intellectual level I already knew that reality was more messy, but emotionally, I had an implicit confidence that if I were a diligent Rabbi and faithfully discharged my tasks, that God would take care of me in the same way that, if I did my work, my congregants would take care of me. This didn't happen. Jacob's struggles were enormous and all-consuming. I could see that fear dominated a good part of his emotional life (and ours) and none of us knew where this was heading, or how to fashion a meaningful life with autism. My benign view of a God who was in control, a God who determined outcomes, a God who could shield the chosen and could change natural law to protect the favored ones; that vision shattered.

I spent two years largely not talking to God. It's not that I stopped believing in God's reality, it's just that I knew that it would be better for both of us if we didn't speak.

It turns out to be one of life's ironies, that among the best places to hide from God or from dealing with God is the American congregation. For two years I gave beautiful sermons about ethics and values, history and texts, and nobody noticed that I didn't talk about or to God. At least not publicly. In private, it was a bit more muddled. Even while not talking to God, I would find myself sneaking into my Jacob's room late at night when he was sleeping. I would lay hands on him and I would offer my version of Moses' prayer, *El na rafa na lo*, please God heal him! I would utter these words yet if you had asked me if I believed in a God who heals autism, I would have said no. But I felt compelled to pray nonetheless.

From Where My Help Comes

This was my conundrum: I was not able to think or talk about (or to) God because my notion of God entailed an all-knowing, all-powerful deity who could control

outcomes. That notion of God left me incapable of relationship without betraying my son.

My healing entered through the work of the mind, as I started to do doctoral work on science and religion, which I pursued for the most psychological of reasons. I knew I needed to get a handle on how it was possible in the universe to be a good person and yet to watch one's child struggle with such a life-changing challenge, and I wasn't willing to enlist psychotherapy to explore that question (my mother is an analyst, so you don't have to be Sigmund Freud to surmise why not!), and the only alternative path was to get a doctorate which would allow me to ask the really big existential questions.

I was fortunate to find a doctoral advisor who was really remarkable, both as a human being and as a scholar. Rabbi Dr David Ellenson remains my role model in many, many ways. I began to work and the first step of learning about the universe was to read voraciously in science, an early love of mine from high school. I started reading about evolutionary theory, neurobiology and cognitive psychology, astronomy and cosmogony, all to try to get a handle on what constitutes this world that we live in, and to then figure out what can religion legitimately offer by way of meaning and solace.

I joke that I invented Process Theology, although it is only partially a joke. Countless seekers in every generation discover that the cosmos is interactive, dynamic, and self-determining. Through my readings in science and philosophy, I came up with a distillation of a universe that is profoundly relational, in which all identities exist in their connections to each other, and modify each other by their own choices. I realized that this is a universe that is profoundly dynamic, not at all static; it is a universe of timeliness and not of timelessness. Then I picked-up an anthology on panentheism, and when I got to the chapter on Process Panentheism I realized that I had brothers and sisters in the world, that I was not the first to invent a process theology. Someone had beat me to the punch by about 100 years, and there was a blessed community of people of multiple generations who were already hard at work at articulating the implications of a dynamic relational world. I found a spiritual home with those people and turned to Process with relish.

What Process Theology offers me in addition to extended community is a way to make sense of my son's struggles and triumphs. It allows me to affirm that Jacob isn't being judged or tested, that he in fact is like all of us, living with the random

workings out of a natural order, and that meaning is to be fashioned by his response to life, not by happenstance. I realize that since God is self-surpassing and engaged in everything, every instant, every moment, that Jacob also can be self-surpassing. Indeed he is! A few years ago, after a decade of hard work, Jacob marched across a graduation stage to receive an accredited high school diploma, and it was one of the proudest days of my life. But that day was far from the only proud moment because each and every day I see my Jacob surpassing the limits that the experts assume pertain to him. I see him surpassing his own sense of what is possible. I witness him thinking and writing and communicating; I see him mastering his anger and his fear; I see him creating friendships with people who are neurotypical and people who are on the Autism spectrum. I see him bringing light and joy and meaning into the world, both for himself and for the rest of us.

But not just Jacob, my daughter who is neurotypical is no less a miracle than is he. In fact, every human being, every living entity, the whole of creation is eternally self-surpassing and dynamically interrelated, and that also means we are empowering to each other.

What that new understanding makes possible for me is that I am no longer afraid of an all-powerful, all knowing, bully in the sky. I no longer construe the world through the lens of a morality play in which there were winners and losers although there are beloved and outcast. Instead, divinity reveals itself as permeating all worlds. There is nothing, nothing in the world, no moment of time, no place, no created event, that is not marinating in God. That permeating Divinity is what gives each of us the capacity to reach out and to reach beyond ourselves, to grow in new and unprecedented ways, and to be capable of new achievements and new meanings that continue to make life rich and beautiful and worthy.

Those insights have shaped my professional work, my writing and my thinking, for the last decade. I have now produced books integrating Judaism and Process Thought because it turns out that among other advantages, a Process metaphysics is also a great hermeneutical tool; a great way to interpret ancient texts and reveal their contemporary relevance. I no longer get tripped up by how tall was Adam and Eve at the moment of their creation? What color was Sarah's hair? How old was Isaac at the Akedah? Instead, I am able to understand these narratives as rooted in the Divine but blossoming through the human, and therefore, their

divinity is found not in historical accuracy (the facticity of the events they report) but in the meaning that they reveal through the telling. The notion of radical human equality and dignity is the insight that emerges from the first and second chapters of Genesis. Whether or not there was a first man named Adam and a first woman named Eve becomes trivial because we stake our lives everyday on the biblical insight that each and every person is a child of God. The vitality of democracies vindicates this faith claim.

We stake our lives on the notion that we are each of us facing the imperative to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and that there are no exceptions to that Levitical rule.

All of us must love each other absolutely and we intuit that justice is love with hands, so living a world in which the biblical voice thundering "*tzedek tzedek tirdof, you shall surely pursue justice*" shapes the way we walk in the world.

As a metaphysical perspective and a hermeneutical tool, Process allows me to focus on the deep ways that the bible resonates: It's wisdom, it's compassion, it's morality, it's notion that we are none of us alone, and never forsaken. An insistence that the universe arcs toward justice and that Pharaohs will be brought low. It's very realistic assessment that the fact that we are not alone and won't be forsaken doesn't mean that we won't have to endure terrible tragedy. All life is a mixture of delight and suffering, and consciousness itself brings about the capacity to delight and the capacity to mourn. We human becomings are in some ways the articulate voice of the cosmos and we are the voice of God in the world too, although not God's only voice.

"Panentheism" is the dry, technical term for the understanding that God isn't hermetically sealed from the world, not reducible to some lifeless, platonic definition that stands outside of space and time, which then creates a metaphysical impediment and an ethical catastrophe for those who would be devotees. Instead, Panentheism articulates the insight that the very universe sings with the breath of God, that God is, as the ancient Hebrew author understood, *chei ha-olamim*, the very life of the cosmos. So we live and breathe and walk God; and we reach out and we celebrate God. In doing the work of social justice; and of binding the wounds; and of grieving together and rejoicing together, we do God in the world.

This new understanding allows me to walk and to breathe. It allows me to stand with my son. It provides me a mission each and every day of my life, for which I am profoundly grateful. So too the hearty band of Process thinkers and theologians, who have taken me in and embraced me with such kindness and love, to them: resilient gratitude. To the One who is revealed, both in the unfolding tradition of Torah and in its younger nephew, Process Thought, I offer a lifetime of service and gratitude.

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