



LeoBaeckTemple

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“Kinship”

(in dedication to Rabbi Rachel Cowan, z"l, Father Greg Boyle and all the homies and homegirls at Homeboy Industries)

A couple weeks ago I met a friend in Venice Beach. We strolled around Abbot Kinney and wandered into a new organic supermarket. This place was gorgeous, a mashup of Whole Foods, Bloomingdale's, and a hippie commune.

Serendipity led me to be scanning all the alternative milk beverages: almond milk, oat milk, hazelnut milk, soy milk (boring), and then there it was, on the top shelf. Camel milk!

My jaw dropped, a 16 ounce bottle for \$20.89. The tagline read, “make everyday a humpday.” Now, I'll admit I have a fancy beverage side – we all do. My indulgent hot beverage of choice is a mocha latte, with almond milk. But, camel milk? Beyond.

There is something about the explosion of alternatives to old school cow's milk that speaks to the culture of individualism, of satiating every individual desire.

Yes, many of us have a certain intolerance to dairy – a burden our people bear. But how many options are enough?

I think about the emergent technology in the era of my grandma Sylvia: the butter alternative, margarine. This was when consumers had to knead the yellow dye into the white margarine by hand after purchasing it.

How can it be that we have fifteen milk alternatives including a twenty dollar bottle of camel milk, but we still have homelessness?

What propels us into a state of irrational exuberance when one of our quirky individual appetites are so perfectly sated – yet we can so easily abate our pursuit of finding cures to societal ills which shadow us like demoralized spirits.

Of course, this disequilibrium is not distinct to the US, but it has been an Achilles heel for some time. I am hesitant to blame camel milk or its consumers for all the ills of American society.

But there is something about our outsized focus on meeting our every individual desire, and a disintegrating commitment to the common good, to any sense of shared suffering that propelled earlier generations to accomplish great things.

There is a sense that we are losing our way, that we need a national *teshuvah*, a return to our better self. But, what feels new and raw, is grounded in a much older ailment.

As the 19th century historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote extensively about democracy in mid-19th Century America, said, “As social equality spreads there are more and more people who, though neither rich – nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained and kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs.

Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine their whole destiny is in their own hands.” (Democracy in America, p. 508).

Closer to home, when we do a *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of our soul, individually and as a temple community, how would we assess ourselves against de Tocqueville’s critique?

Inside each of us there are restless pains, calling from our very depths, that we may resist exploring. They may terrify us, leave us feeling isolated, often powerless. This debilitating unease seems to pervade many, as our nation flails.

We cannot comprehend the depths of pain that exists, most of us trying to grasp our destiny with white knuckles, watching as cracks appear in our marbled democracy and America's great promise slows its roll.

Senator John McCain, may his memory be for a blessing, in his final statement, released after his death, challenged us to remember what is possible, "Do not despair of our present difficulties but believe always in the promise and greatness of America, because nothing is inevitable here."

An accessible antidote to this fear and despair is to expand our sense of kinship and connection with others, and ourselves.

Father Greg Boyle, the Jesuit priest who founded Homeboy Industries, providing hope, job training, and support to formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated men and women in East Los Angeles, writes extensively about kinship.

Father Boyle defines kinship as how we achieve a sense of awe at what the poor have to carry instead of standing in judgment. Where we measure our compassion not in how we serve the poor but how we see ourselves in kinship with them, in mutuality.

Father Boyle challenges us, writing, "To stand with those whose burdens are more than they can bear...you will go from here and have this exquisite privilege once in a while to be able to stand with the easily despised and the readily left out, with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop, and (stand) with the disposable, so the day will come when we stop throwing people away."

The extension of kinship to the poor and most vulnerable is the internal exercise of embracing our most impoverished self – where we are the most defeated and fragile.

Kinship is a tall order, but the absence of kinship is far worse – it is living in denial of our own pain and the pain that surrounds us. While the concept of kinship and responsibility are not new, the struggle to live them into the world is the human challenge for the ages.

A strong example of what I mean by kinship can be found in the Book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy, Moses prepares the Israelites to live in the Promised Land and instructs them about the mitzvah of the Eglah

Arufah. Eglah Arufah, is an atonement offering for when a slain person is found in a field and the slayer is unknown.

Once the slain body is found, the elders and leaders of the nearby towns are sent out to measure the distance to the closest towns to identify who has to undertake the atonement sacrifice. Now this next part is a little gruesome.

After the closest town is determined, the elders from this town must take a young female cow, and bring her to a riverbed. When the elders arrive at the riverbed, they break the cow's neck, this is the *eglah arufah*.

After this atonement offering, the elders make the declaration: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Absolve, O Adonai, Your people Israel whom You redeemed, and do not let guilt for the loss of life of the innocent remain among Your people Israel."

Why should the Torah make this a mitzvah, a commandment? Why care about a slain body in an empty field? Of course, the whole notion of atonement through sacrifice and how it is achieved seems "odd" or repulsive to modernist sensibilities – or could.

Alas, I'm encouraging us to look at it metaphorically, as the rabbis of the Talmud, Maimonides and later scholars do.

The divine, through Moses is seeking to inculcate a sense of communal responsibility. The rabbis believe the reason elders and leaders are sent themselves to measure the distance from the slain body to the closest town is that this responsibility is something one cannot delegate.

Further, there is a rabbinic interpretation that the cause of the slain person's death is related to the fact that society abdicated its responsibility to care for the vulnerable, and this person was sent out without food and provisions, and therefore more susceptible to danger.

Additionally, building on the theme of communal responsibility, it is believed that the fields where the body was found must lie fallow until the *eglah arufah*, the atonement is made or the slayer is captured. This is meant to animate the owner of the field, and in turn the community to act, to find the murderer.

What are the proverbial “slain bodies” in our field, or in a more contemporary frame, our field of vision?

For me, the slain bodies on my spiritual field are unresolved relationships and undigested reminders of when I did not show up as my best self. They are also the homeless at the corner of Wilshire and Sepulveda I pass twice a day. It is the undocumented immigrants, more than one million in LA County, who live in fear of being deported by ICE, torn away from their kids and families.

And, it is black men in prisons held without money for bail.

Each of us, at different times, have experienced the sense of relief, even liberation, when the corners of our spiritual field, too long fallow, are replenished, sowed anew and allowed to nourish us once again.

Through this year’s Elul emails, congregants beautifully and powerfully shared personal stories of their own path to forgiveness, and the rebirth that occurs through atonement. We all have the capacity to atone, to forgive, to be transformed. At a societal level we feel it with civil rights, same sex marriage and when other forms of oppression are overturned.

Closer to home, last January, twenty-five people from LBT participated in a month-long Jewish meditation intensive to cultivate the practice of extending and receiving love.

One of the central practices was to identify a time you were deeply cared for. After one reflection session, a member I’ll call Sarah pulled me aside and shared that this was a difficult and painful exercise. She was reminded of her mom’s failure to show up for her, to really love her. She never felt that sense of unconditional love.

Compounding the pain, her mom was in a nursing home in the final season of her life, struggling with dementia and frequently unresponsive. She carried the conflicting emotions of both deeply desiring to show up for her mom in ways she felt her mom never showed up for her while also secretly wishing the relationship would just fade away. When the nurse alerted Sarah that her mother only had days to live we went to be by her bedside, so her mom could say the *vidui*, her final confessions.

After saying the *vidui* and the *sh'ma* Sarah read a prayer we found. The prayer, written by Rabbi Naomi Levy, was a stretch for Sarah, but it reflected how she truly felt. Harnessing her courage she prayed these words, to her mother and herself,

"Mom, I missed you when you were alive. I missed the words you never spoke, the affection you didn't give, the apology you wouldn't make. I missed the relationship we never had, the acceptance you couldn't offer.

I've spent my whole life missing you, longing for the parent you could never be. And now that you are gone I miss you even more.

I don't want to stop hoping for you to change. I don't want to stop waiting for you. It's hard to let you go, to concede that things between us will never improve.

I love you. And though you weren't able to express it, I believe you loved me too.

May God be with you and bless you with peace. Amen."

After one beat, fighting its way through labored breath, her mom whispered, "I love you."

We both were flush with the unanticipated response.

I stepped out of the room to give them some time alone and then we went outside. Sarah had spoken a painful truth that had been keeping that part of her spiritual field fallow. Her courage to speak a hard inner pain to a beloved was her *eglah arufah*, an offering for atonement. And with it came immense relief and liberation.

Joseph Goldstein, a world renowned mindfulness teacher says, "all self knowledge is bad news." But that is not true forever. We transform it when we encounter it, when we wrestle it awake and extricate it from our spiritual field.

Jose, one of the homies, a former gang member from Homeboy Industries, once spoke about how his mom beat him every single day during his elementary school years. His back was bloodied and scarred and caused him to

wear three t-shirts to absorb the blood and hide the scars. On top of that, he was teased by classmates for wearing three t-shirts in 100 degree weather.

Jose said, "I wore three t-shirts well into my adult years because I was ashamed of my wounds. I didn't want anybody to see them. But now I welcome my wounds. I run my fingers over my scars. My wounds are my friends. After all, how can I help heal the wounded if I don't welcome my own wounds?"

As Jose beautifully teaches us, our capacity to transform the world is tethered to our openness to our own self awareness and transformation. We are not required to fix it, we usually can't, but we are charged with being present with the slain bodies in our spiritual field and the ragged edges in our community.

Another LBT congregant, a member I'll call Lanie, shared a recent encounter with her cleaning woman of seven years, Ursula. Many of us are extremely close with those who care for our kids or parents, clean our home, tend to our garden, and guard our buildings.

For many of us, these are the only black and brown people who are part of our inner circle. In my own home I think of Martha who cares for my kids, keeps our apartment from falling into mayhem, does our laundry, and even restocks my sock drawer. Intimate! Martha is a blessing in my life, allowing me to be a better father, husband, and rabbi.

In Lanie's case, one day she returned home and approached Ursula. Inspired by her involvement with justice work at LBT, and in turn an increased awareness of the anxiety and fear in immigrant communities, Lanie asked Ursula if they could sit down to speak for a moment. Lanie looked into Ursula's eyes, and simply said, "I know there is a lot happening in our country right now and I wanted to see if you are ok?"

Hot tears streamed down Ursula's face. She took a couple deep breathes and said, "two days ago my husband received deportation orders." Although in each other's lives, living on the same "field" they never stretched beyond "acceptable" boundaries.

The uncertainty, fear, suffering that Ursula and her husband carried with them was now laid bare, a body on their shared field. Although inclined to swoop in and be a savior, to fix this "problem" Lanie learned there was not a simple fix.

Instead, Lanie learned to walk with Ursula and her husband. To take her cues and be led by Ursula and her family.

Lanie helped as she could, as did LBT, connecting them with LA VOICE, our interfaith partners. Lanie's compassion allowed Ursula to make her private pain public. After this encounter, their relationship deepened.

Our responsibility for the *eglah arufah* does not always allow us to act to repair the breach. Nevertheless, we can move into kinship by the simple and profound act of bearing witness.

Seeking kinship requires us to awake to the true depth of love that exists at all time between all people, a love of accountability. When I arrive each morning at LBT, I see Maurice the security guard. We chat. We talk about our kids, and the weather, and relationships. I ask him how he is doing, and he says, "I woke up today. So everything else is easy."

One day I asked him this question, and he went through a list of other bad things that hadn't happened to him – no car accident, house didn't burn down and on, until he casually added, "and I wasn't shot." My heart skipped a beat.

"Really, do you worry about being shot?" It just came out. He looked at me, cocked his head and smiled and said to the universe, "he thinks I'm worried about being shot," and he chuckled.

A moment of awkward silence passed and then we caught the thread of the conversation and kept moving.

But when I sat down at my desk I reflected that not once have I ever worried about being shot. I care about Maurice, his five year old daughter and his family. When I ask myself what is the feeling I have in my heart about Maurice it is love. Love and a deep sense of kinship.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson wrote, "the principle behind the law of *eglah arufah* is that a person is also responsible for what occurs outside of her domain – outside of the areas where she is fully in control.

When a murdered traveler is found out in the field, the elders of the nearest city must go out there and bring the *eglah arufah* to atone for the crime, although it occurred “outside of their jurisdiction”... The same applies on the personal level in all areas of life.

A person never has the right to say, “This is outside of my element. I have no obligation to deal with this.” If it is something that, by divine providence, one has been made aware of, that means that there is something one can, and must, do to positively influence the end result.

Another congregant, a member I’ll call Janet, recently began volunteering through an LBT initiative, to register prisoners in the LA County Jail.

She reflected on her more than ten visits: “Before I started, never having been to a jail before, I assumed there would be barriers between myself and the inmates, that they would seem very different from someone I would meet on the outside; nothing to do with race, religion, age, etc. – but just by virtue of their being incarcerated.

I hadn’t articulated this to myself exactly, but I may have felt they would be angry or resentful at being there, perhaps distant, and as a result, maybe not so easy to talk with. What I found as soon as I talked with the first man... is that there were no barriers. We talked as any two friendly people would, because they were all friendly and eager to sit with us and talk. Whatever preconceptions I had had, conscious or unconscious, melted away immediately.

Mostly I feel privileged to have this opportunity to meet with and get to know people, even just a bit, most of us never have any contact with.”

Janet was transformed, and transformed others, through her offering. Who she encountered in the field was not a slain body, something, foul, unpleasant, terrifying. She found another person seeking to be seen and heard, to be human.

The fifteenth century rabbi, Arama writes: “the Torah presents the case of the *eglah arufah* to illustrate the extent of the liability shared by people who are apparently quite unconnected with the murder...”

The Torah describes the ever widening circles of search for the party responsible, and the need for all parties to exonerate themselves from having had any connection with the crime committed.”

The visual image of an ever widening field of responsibility of kinship is a powerful agitation to our inclination to see everything flowing toward us – filtering the suffering in the universe through our limited understanding of what is possible.

The great torah commentator Nechama Leibowitz provocatively writes: “responsibility for wrongdoing does not only lie with the perpetrator herself and even with the accessory. Lack of proper care and attention are also criminal.

Whoever keeps to her own quiet corner and refuses to have anything to do with the ‘evil world,’ who observes oppression and violence and does not stir a finger in protest cannot proclaim with a clear conscience that, ‘Our hands have not shed this blood.’” (Nechama Leibowitz, Studies in Devarim, 207-208).

When we allow our observations of oppression to animate our action we invite transformation, of ourselves and our society. This is the very act of *teshuvah* – of noting personal and societal rupture and seeking to return to our best selves, who we are as a nation at our best.

We all want big change and we want it fast. Instant kinship.

Add hot water, mix in flavor packet, stir, drink.

But change is slow.

John Paul Lederbach, a professor at Notre Dame, encouraged us to move away from expecting social change to come quickly in the form of critical mass, the idea you need a large cohesive group of people all pulling in the same direction to make change.

That is often what happens at the tail end of a movement – what the civil rights movement looked like in the 1960s, but had almost no sense of critical mass in the 30s, 40s, even the 50s.

This is equally true with personal change, sometimes we need to shift one small thing, say one sentence as Lanie did to her cleaning woman Ursula, or the prayer that Sarah said at her dying mother’s bedside, or take a risk and move into a new space as Janet did in the LA County Jail.

Lederbach urges that instead of passively awaiting a messianic critical mass, what is essential is to see our individual work as critical yeast. That small changes, small shifts, and small awakenings serve as catalysts for much larger change.

Michelle Maiese, an interpreter of this critical yeast metaphor, writes, “Yeast is the smallest ingredient, yet it drives potential change and is necessary to make the other ingredients grow... Sitting on the shelf, yeast has no real capacity to bring about growth. It must be mixed in with the larger mass... Yeast cannot be mixed in directly and quickly. Initial growth must be cultivated carefully.”

Moses is one model of critical yeast in our master narrative of the Exodus.

Rabbi Art Green writes about the miracle of Mt. Sinai not as the Torah’s revelation, but rather the creation of the second set of tables. God is the sole creator of the first set. But, when Moses descends with the first tablets he finds the Israelites worshiping a golden calf. In Moses’ fury, the first tablets are shattered. He ascends a second time, pleading with God for forgiveness.

There is a dramatic pause, and then, God accepts Moses’ requests for *teshuvah*. This moment expands God’s heart, and God is transformed. And, God learns a lesson. The second set of tables are carved by the hand of Moses while the words are from God. It is a collaborative effort. It is kinship in its purest form.

Green suggests that our work, during these days of awe, are to draft anew the covenant we each seek to enter with the divine. I would expand this to include a covenant of kinship with ourselves and the those in the circles around us. We are here today to atone for our shortcomings and imagine a country and world which we aspire to leave our children and the next generation.

Terry Tempest Williams writes, “The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions?”

And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up – ever – trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?”

Far too often we close our eyes to the slain bodies in our field – we close our heart to kinship with others. We minimize our capacity for change: we have no time, we convince ourselves that society will never change, and on. But change is happening all the time, good and bad.

Each of us has the power to be the critical yeast, to catalyze our own transformation and create ever widening circles of kinship toward renewing our covenant and rebuilding our country.

As Mary Oliver writes, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Shana tova!