

SERMON FOR SHIR LIBEYNU
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The Multiple Troubles of Man

The multiple troubles of man,
my brother, like slander and pain,
amaze you? Consider the heart
which holds them all
in strangeness, and doesn't break.

This is a poem by Shmuel HaNagid, a prominent Jewish poet in the literary renaissance of medieval Muslim Spain (ca 993-1056 c.e.) who wrote in both Hebrew and Arabic. This translation is by Peter Cole, a visiting professor from Jerusalem to my alma mater, Wesleyan University, who taught a class called *Medieval Hebrew Poetry in Muslim Spain in*

Translation. HaNagid was the Prime Minister of the Muslim state of Granada, battlefield commander of the non-Jewish Granadan army, in addition to being one of the leading religious figures of his time — a time when Jews and Muslims thrived culturally and socially in complete interdependence - when fear was not the dominant decision-maker, a moment of “[holding] it all in strangeness,” of embracing and benefiting from difference, from paradox.

Consider the heart which holds them all in strangeness, holds them all in strangeness, and doesn't break.

I think of all the ways we are currently scourged by religious fundamentalism, political extremism, racism, homophobia, violence - and I notice amongst my peers that our unanimous instinct is to attribute the horrors we see to an external entity. *It's the fault of the US presidential candidates. Or, It's religion, let's eliminate or abandon religion so we can all enjoy the same, unified vantage.* But I've been observing, and I'm saddened to notice that if we deleted something external and seemingly divisive, such as religion, we would find the unappetizing aspects of our natures - our shadowy urges for power, domination, fanaticism - unfortunately intact. Our religions, our culture, even our politicians, are simply bullhorns to our intrinsic patterns as an imperfect species.

Religion *is* dangerous, undoubtedly, but it's as dangerous as any tool - knife, art, poetry, language, friendship, smartphone. It is dangerous insofar as it can be read from any imaginable angle and used to any conceivable end - its danger, but also, its beauty, lies in

its interpretability. There is nothing that has only one use, one iteration, one possibility. What happens if we begin to look for new ways to enter into paradox, to embrace it, to “hold it all in strangeness,” instead of looking for the comforting, but ultimately misleading, signposts of duality - good/evil, us/them, mine/yours . . . If we can hold and protect that space of possibility and paradox, we might allow new, more nuanced versions of reality to emerge, ways of living that are not fear-based or violence-inciting.

I recently spoke with a friend as he recounted his wife’s harrowing birth story. Just before he called, I had been walking along the beach - it was sunset. A really soft pastel California sunset, with a warm breeze. I had noticed the ease I feel when I don’t have any eyes on me. Nature can be such a wealth of eyelessness — a deep, sincere privacy. To be watched, no matter how unfeigned the fondness of the person watching us, carries an anxiety, a scrutiny, a call to fashion ourselves in the beholder’s image.

As my friend recounted his and his wife’s story, I thought of the womb as a sort of ultimate arena of becoming — of being held, carried, our every need provided for, our energy perceived and received — all in darkness, in eyelessness. My friend and his wife could feel their son, feel his becoming, but he had the privacy of becoming authentically himself for those first most precious nine-ish months of his existence, shielded from their view. This privacy is a necessary condition for the infinite potential of formation, of creation.

That eyelessness of the womb brought to mind a crude lesson in quantum physics that my cousin had given me, wherein she recounted the Double- Slit experiment; in this experiment, researchers sent light particles through a filter that allowed us to see where and how they landed. She explained to me that just the act of placing a camera or sensor in their midst changed the outcome of the experiment, making their movements more predictable. Once the light particles were expected to be somewhere, there they were, and we were left never knowing where they *could have been*. Nothing has just one use, one iteration, one possibility — and our awareness and presence seem to play a role in shaping our reality and surroundings.

If we look at religion as one of those forces that has many possible interpretations, if it brings comfort, structure, meaning, poetry to one group and justification for horrific massacre to another, is it actually useful to try to dismantle it? To be clear, I’m not writing in defense of religion - if I felt that doing away with it would nullify the multiplying crises we are all in, I would be first in line to hand in the beauty and richness of my Jewish heritage, the rituals, songs, and celebrations that have become essential to me. I wouldn’t hesitate. I have always held my culture the way I hold anything or anyone dear to me, which is to say, steadfastly but lightly, treating each precious presence as, as Virginia Woolf wrote, “a thing you could ruffle with your breath, and a thing you could not dislodge with a team

of horses.” But I know this trade-in would be moot — we are in fact being charged with a much more complex task.

Firstly and perhaps most urgently, I believe we are being asked to reconcile and dissolve our reflex of fear. With fear comes borders - physical borders, energetic borders, mental borders, conceptual borders. Notice what a closing of a border does to your *estado de alma*, your “state of soul” — When, in order to feel grounded in your “you-ness,” you have to exclude and oust those opinions, people, and energies that are not your own or do not mirror your own, how stable will that structure be? How volatile? When we identify a virus, we vaccinate. We draw close enough to understand and let our cells learn immunity, and we become stronger for the encounter. Neither full, unprepared exposure nor total avoidance are healthy or even possible.

In contrast to living from a place of fear, what becomes possible when we allow objects, ideas, people to continually grow and change, when we do not impose outdated forms or labels on them?

In 2009 there was an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario by Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone, an artist of the Arte Povera movement in Italy in the 1960’s, called *The Hidden Life Within*. It was a long sunlit gallery filled with large rough cuts of timber, into which the artist had carved meticulously, revealing the intact shape of the sapling, an earlier, younger, more slight version of the tree. The mechanics of trees are such that each year, they add a ring of new growth to their trunk diameter. So Penone carves away to one of the first “versions” of each tree. We immediately see, as the catalogue for the show observes, “. . . the interdependence among all organic life forms. . . an awareness of a common vital force in all living things. Rather than imposing a form, the artist . . . draws out an existing form.” Penone’s work alludes to a wise suggestion - that we quietly observe our inherent natures and allow that authenticity to be revealed, rather than trying to “impose a form” and the inevitable contortion that ensues. Much like Penone’s trees, even as we grow, strengthen, provide, sometimes harden, that inner tenderness, that place of privacy and potential, remains embedded in us. This pliability is, in fact, the essence of who we are, regardless of who we fashion ourselves to be.

Can we drastically raise our own standards of decency, generosity, selfcare and care for others, patience, awareness of our surroundings, curiosity about and deep respect for lives that are different from our own, and really just raise the standard for what we can imagine into reality with the infinite color palette that time and privilege have afforded us? Can we embrace the potential energy of paradox and not rush into the comfort and false security of duality? We are, I believe, being asked to examine “the multiple troubles of man” with precision and clarity, and, to somehow convince our hearts to “hold them all in strangeness, and [not] break.”