

There is an old story about Rabbi Joseph Karo, the great sixteenth-century scholar and mystic.

Whether it happened exactly this way, no one can say. The stories that survive for centuries aren't always the ones that tell us exactly what happened. Sometimes they survive because they tell us something true about ourselves. I think this is one of those stories.

It takes place in Sfat, in the hills of the Galilee, where the narrow stone streets were filled with scholars and mystics. People went there from across the Jewish world to study, to pray, to seek wisdom. And among them lived Rabbi Joseph Karo, whose reputation as a brilliant scholar had already begun to spread far beyond the city.

One evening, long after the streets had grown quiet and most of the lamps in the city had gone dark, a light was still burning in the window of Rabbi Karo's study.

He was sitting alone with a single passage of Torah.

It wasn't particularly long, or even a passage that anyone else might have found especially troublesome. But for whatever reason, Karo couldn't make sense of it. He read it again and again, until he knew the words by heart. He followed one interpretation only to discover that it unravelled a few lines later. He tried another, and then another, each one seeming promising until it wasn't.

Every so often he would lean back in his chair, close his eyes, and decide that enough was enough. He would blow out the candle, go to bed, and come back to it in the morning.

But then he'd light another candle.

There had to be something he was missing. Something he hadn't yet seen. He couldn't rest until he figured it out.

The story says this went on for days.

The passage followed him everywhere. Walking through the streets of Sfat, he would find himself quietly repeating its words. While other people spoke to him, part of his mind was still back at the text. Some versions of the story even say that he fasted. The question had taken hold of him so completely that everything else had begun to recede into the background.

And then, one afternoon, he read the passage again, perhaps for the hundredth time, and something shifted.

The words on the page were exactly the same. This time, though, he saw something he hadn't seen before. One insight opened onto another, and suddenly the passage that had seemed so tangled began to make sense.

I imagine he sat there for a while, taking it in. That particular kind of relief when you've been wrestling with something for so long that you've almost forgotten what it feels like *not* to be wrestling with it.

The next morning, he walked into the study hall feeling lighter than he had in days.

The room was already full of the familiar noise of learning. Books were open across the tables. Study partners were arguing over texts. And at the far end of the room, almost hidden behind a table much too large for him, was a young boy studying the very same passage that had consumed Rabbi Karo for the better part of a week.

Karo stopped near the boy's table.

The child read quietly, tracing the words with his finger. After a few moments, he looked up and said aloud what he thought the passage meant.

It was exactly the interpretation Karo had spent days trying to find.

He just stood there.

Around him, the study hall carried on. People talked. Pages turned. Someone probably argued loudly about something. But Karo was barely hearing any of it.

This child had looked at the passage for a few minutes and seen what had taken him days of frustration, exhaustion, and doubt to uncover.

And on the walk home, the question kept bothering him.

Had all of that struggle really been necessary?

Had he spent days making something difficult that should have been obvious?

That night, he had a dream.

Some versions of the story say that a heavenly voice spoke to him. Others say it was the prophet Elijah. Still others say it was the Maggid, the heavenly teacher who, according to Jewish tradition, sometimes revealed hidden wisdom to Rabbi Karo. The details change depending on who's telling the story, but what Karo is told remains essentially the same.

The voice says:

"Do not be discouraged. Since the day the Torah was given at Sinai, this teaching has existed only in potential. It was waiting for someone to uncover it. Your days of struggle were the very thing that brought this teaching into the world. Because you wrestled with it, because you refused to let it go, the path is open now. And because the path is open, a child can walk it with ease."

The next morning, Karo saw what had happened differently.

He had gone to sleep wondering whether all that struggle had been a waste of time. Now he wondered whether the child's ease was possible precisely because of it.

Maybe the answer wasn't the only thing he had uncovered.

Maybe he had opened a path.

A few months ago, a student of mine shared this story with me, and I haven't been able to let it go. I love the picture it paints of how wisdom moves through the world.

Karo never teaches the child. The child doesn't even know what Karo has been doing. And yet somehow their stories touch. One person struggles with something until a path opens, and someone else gets to begin a little farther along, or as my lovely partner Dan says, someone loosened the pickle jar for us, and now we have these delicious pickles to eat.

I keep wondering how often that happens in our own lives.

We inherit so much that we barely notice. Ideas that seem obvious to us now weren't always obvious. Traditions that feel natural were shaped and reshaped by generations of people before they reached us. We live in communities other people worked very hard to build. We walk through doors somebody else had to push open.

And most of the time, we don't know who did the pushing.

The more I've sat with this story, the more I've found myself thinking about what I've been calling **sacred interconnectedness**.

So much of our lives happen this way. We affect one another without knowing it. We carry things people gave us years ago. Something we say in passing stays with someone. A choice we make creates an opening for somebody else. We become part of other people's stories, and they become part of ours.

Rosh Hashanah gives us time to look at our own lives—to think about where we've been, where we've missed the mark, what we want to change, and who we hope to become.

This story has added another question for me this year:

How is my life becoming part of someone else's?

What am I passing on?

What am I making possible?

What kind of world are my choices helping to create?

There is a reason I keep coming back to the words we've already sung tonight:

הִנֵּה מַה־טוֹב וּמַה־נָּעִים לְשֶׁבֶת אֲחִים גַּם־יַחַד

Hinei mah tov u'mah na'im, shevet kulanu gam yachad.

How good and how beautiful it is when people dwell together.

I've sung those words more times than I could possibly count. I'm sure you have, too. This year I'm hearing something a little different in them.

Shevet... gam yachad. To dwell together. To live alongside one another long enough that our lives inevitably become entangled. We learn from each other. We make things easier for each other. We challenge each other. We open doors and clear paths, and sometimes someone walks through a door we opened without ever knowing our name. We loosen the pickle jar, and they get to eat the briny goodness.

That's the sacred interconnectedness I want us to explore together this year.

We have inherited paths that other people cleared for us. And right now, whether we realize it or not, we are clearing paths too.

I don't know who will walk them.

Neither did Rabbi Karo.

And maybe that's part of the beauty of it.

As we begin 5787, may we pay a little more attention to the paths we're leaving behind us, and to the people whose lives are becoming intertwined with our own.

Hinei mah tov u'mah na'im, shevet kulanu gam yachad.

How good and how beautiful it is when we all dwell together.

Shanah tovah and Shabbat shalom.