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NORMAN LAMM

Rosh Hashanah II, 1961

Yom Kippur - Yizkor

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"HEAVEN ON EARTH"

Yizkor time at Y.K. is an occasion of solemn introspection. We contemplate the lives of our dear ones who are no longer here. We think of our own lives. We wonder about life & death in general.

~~There are many moods to this day that, taken together, form the colorful tapestry that is Rosh Hashanah. One of them in particular is a most depressing and somber mood.~~

And the truth is that your thoughts
 it is expressed in the awesomely simple words of the Paytan which we recite after the Unetaneh Tokef: Adam yesodo me'afar ve'sofo le'afar.

Man's origin is in dust and his end is in dust;
 He makes his living at the risk of his life;
 He is like unto fragile earthenware,
 The grass that withers,
 The flower that fades,
 The fleeting shadow and the passing cloud,
 The wind that blows away
 And the floating dust,
 Yea, and as a dream that vanishes.

Earth-bound man is low in origin and unworthy in destiny.
 He issues from the dirt of the earth only to be delivered into it again -- mortal, weak, puny. What a frightfully realistic judgment on man's presumptions and pretensions!

But is this the whole story? Is there nothing more to man than vain illusions surrounded on one side by shameful origins and on the other by disgraceful ends? "What is a man," cried Hamlet, "if his chief good, and market of his time, be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more." If afar -- earth, dust, food, base matter -- if this is all there is to man, then indeed man is only a beast. But can Judaism agree to this pronouncement?

No, certainly not. Man may begin in afar and end in it, but there is a great deal that goes on in-between. Many a great man has inscribed on his tombstone only two dates -- of birth and death. They merely confirm that he began and ended in earth -- but they do not reveal the loftiness^f he achieved in the span of time in-between. Between lowly birth and dismal death, a man has an average of seventy years or more in which to transcend his limits of afar.

What is that man can and must do between his rise from and return to earth that can help him escape from the gaping emptiness and the brooding meaninglessness that threaten to encompass him at all times? The prophet Isaiah provided the answer (51:16): li'netoa shamayim ve'liysod aretz ve'lemor le'Tziyon ami atah --- to plant the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth, and to say to Zion, "thou art my people." What a noble challenge to man - li'netoa shamayim, to plant heaven on earth! You may begin in earth and later return to it, but in the meantime your task is to plant seeds of heavenliness in the earth! Bless the afar with a bit of shamayim! Instead of striving to send man from earth to heaven, try rather to bring heaven to man on earth.

One need not be an astronaut to perform this noble task. Anyone can do it under the ordinary circumstances of daily life. You smile and show a bit of warmth to a lonely person convinced that there is no one in the world who cares about him - and you have planted heaven on earth. You take the time to visit a

A person long hospitalized and removed from the affairs of society - and you have made a little heaven in the corner of a sickroom. A word of encouragement to a diffident child, a gift or loan to a friend in need at the right time, a compliment properly placed -- all these are seeds of heaven. Develop peaceful relations in your own home and strive to prevent friction amongst friends, and you are indeed planting heaven - for oseh shalom bi'meromay, the source of peace is in heaven above.

Teach a child Torah, send your son or daughter to a yeshiva, make it possible for other parents to educate their children Jewishly, study Judaism yourself by attending lectures and classes and reading - and you are implanting eternal life in our mundane world. No wonder that at the conclusion of our Torah reading we bless G-d who has given us a Torah of truth ve'chayei olam nata be'tokhenu, and implanted within us eternal life. Informing a Jewish soul with Torah -- whether a child's soul or your own -- is a planting of heaven because it is the only way to make the path from afar to afar, from birth to death, something other than a meaningless exercise in vain pretenses.

The proper observance of Shabbat - not just staying away from your business - is truly, in the words of the zemirot, me'ein olam haba, a foretaste of the world-to-come, a bit of

heaven on earth. Those who observe the Sabbath as it should be observed know that one never suffers from the various restraints Judaism places upon us on the Shabbat. On the contrary, they prevent us from falling into the earthiness of our weekday habits, and they leave us open and accesible to enjoy the seeds of heaven, to delight in the harvest of that planting, which is being ourselves, enjoying our families and the company of our friends in a leisurely way.

In your businesses - the very center of all the turmoil and tumult that seems all afar - there too you can plant the seeds of heaven. Give a chance to the beginner, prevent a competitor from utterly collapsing, treat an employee or employer as a feeling human being, and you will have fulfilled your lofty mission of li'netoa shamayim. For that is how a Hasidic sage (Sefat Emet) interpreted the blessing of Isaac to Jacob, ve'yiten lekha ha-elokim mi-tal ha-shamayim u-mi'shemanei ha-aretz, may He the Lord, give you ha-elokim, the G-dliness to be able to bring the dew of heaven down upon the fat of the earth, to be able to engage in profit-making pursuit of the fat of the land and still be under the benign and divine influence of the dew of heaven. So that man may originate in dust and return to it, but he still can, in the interim, make a heaven on earth.

Yet the question remains, granted that this is man's function, how is he to be motivated to pursue this lofty goal? What can drive him to it? Furthermore, why does the poet suggest this

noble idea of planting heaven so indirectly, by stressing the gloomy, morbid thoughts of man's base origin and sordid end?

The answer, to my mind, represents a fundamental outlook of Judaism. But allow me to present it to you by relating ~~the~~ a true story that appeared in a recently published biography of Alfred Nobel, the man who established the Nobel Peace Prizes ("Nobel" by Nicholas Halasz, Orion Press 1959). One morning in 1888, Nobel awoke to read his own obituary. It was a simple journalistic error - his brother had died, and a French reporter announced the death of the wrong brother. Other people might have been shaken up - Nobel was shocked to the core. Suddenly he saw himself as the world saw him, as posterity would see him: "the dynamite king," the man whose main virtue was that as a leading industrialist he had amassed a fortune. He would be remembered only for the fact that he became rich by being a merchant of death. At that moment he decided to dedicate his life and fortune to the pursuit of peace - and so was born the Nobel Peace Prize.

Do you see what I mean, my friend? ^S_Λ The most effective way of being inspired to plant heaven is to be shocked into realizing that adam..sofo le'afar, that man must die and be swallowed up by the earth. It is a radical method - but it works. When the Paytan reminds us of man's lowly end, he is bidding us read our own obituaries. What have we achieved during life? Other than

a few courtesy announcements by some organizations, what will be the real imprint of our lives upon the world that survives us? - that we made money? - that we tried with all our hearts and souls to have a good time? - Adam, O Man, remember vesodo me'afar, from the very moment that you are created out of the dust of the earth, that sofo le'afar, that ultimately you must return to that selfsame earth, and then you will be moved, during the time allotted to you, li-netoa shamayim, to sow the seeds of heaven as long as you can, and then to reap the celestial harvest. No wonder that our Rabbis counseled us that one of the ways to avoid sin is mazkirin lo yom ha-mitch, to remember our mortality, the fact that life must end. Indeed, if man is spurred on by the sobering thought of adam vesodo me'afar ve'sofo le'afar, to the point where he dedicates himself li'netoa shamayim, to plant heaven on earth, then he will never be ashamed of his lowly origins, or afraid of his miserable end, neither sorry that he was born nor afraid to die. Perhaps that is the secret source of strength of truly pious people - the contemplation of death has lead them to a worthy life which has, in turn, made them brave in the face of death.

The mood of the prayer of adam vesodo me'afar may thus be depressing, but its goal and theme are truly uplifting. For in the Machzor it is followed by the Kedushah, the prayer in which man sanctifies G-d darei maalah in darei matah, in the

company of angels, the inhabitants of heaven. And then Almighty G-d says to us, ve'lemor le'tziyon ami atah, He says to the people of Israel, "you are My people." Or better, in the paraphrase of the Zohar, G-d says to us not ami atah, "you are My people," but imi atah, "you are together with Me," lemechevei shutefa imi, "you are My partners," mah ana be'milula dili avdit shamayim va-aretz, of hakhi at - - "just as I by My word created heaven and earth, so can you, by your conduct, bring heaven down to earth."

וְנִשְׁמַח בְּפָנֵי ה' -

That is a grand vision and a glorious invitation. Alah Elokim we share the company of angels in Y.K. as we are called to take hold with us, for the rest of the bi-torah - G-d rises up with the call of the Shofar. The earthly year, a bit of this heaven, a taste of this world. Indeed, Shofar challenges us to rise with G-d so that we may bring heaven down with us and plant its seeds on our barren earth, the soil of our souls, and the loam of our land.

May we respond to that invitation with all our heart and soul. May we plant these seeds in happiness and reap the harvest in joy.