

Bindings: Our Struggle with G-d

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(PUTTING ON T'FILLIN)

It was the Sunday morning after my Bar Mitzvah. The last few days had been a blur. I discovered that in our small Conservative synagogue the Bar Mitzvah of the rabbi's son was an event! Everyone had come out and the shul was as full as if it were Rosh Hashanah. I was not used to such attention: I am a middle child after all! Our community didn't go in for Bar Mitzvah parties, but Shabbat - Shabbat was a big deal. I was overwhelmed - and mostly by the vision of my normally stern father, The Rabbi, showing public pride in me.

So I was a little surprised when my father woke me up on Sunday morning with the words: "it's time to go to the synagogue." I'd just spent the past Friday night and Saturday morning at the synagogue. And these services were not short. You mean there's more?

The sanctuary was mostly empty and darkened after its big weekend. A few older men - who all know me, though I could not have named them, looked at me with expectation. My father sat down with me in a pew - I was always accustomed to seeing him on the bimah, I didn't know he was allowed to sit like an ordinary Jew. He stood me up and pulled out a pair of *t'fillin*. I can still smell the tanned black leather. "This is what it means to be a Bar Mitzvah, a responsible Jew" he told me as he gently slipped the box with the words of the Sh'ma onto my right arm, its hard wooden frame bit into my side. It was a little difficult for him, in part because I am left-handed and therefore wear the *t'fillin* backwards from the way he did. More importantly, his difficulty arose from the emotion of the moment - seeing his little boy take on the rituals of a man. At last I could count in the minyan, the assemblage of 10 adult males - and it was only males in those days - which allowed the full prayers to take place. I struggled to remember the intricate pattern of wrapping the long straps about my forearm, lower arm and hand. It was difficult to remember the details because I was so unaccustomed to my father's touch. It was not his way. So I simply inhaled the experience of proximity as the tie was made.

וְאַרְשָׁתֶיךָ לִי לְעוֹלָם he said after teaching me the first prayer. "*I bind you to me forever*¹."

Suddenly, as he said these words a memory came to me. It had been some years earlier, early in the morning, and I walked into his home study unannounced. There he was, standing by himself in *tallit* and *t'fillin* reciting the morning prayers. He looked to me like something from another world, an ancient throwback - the caricature of an old-fashioned devout Jew. A look of surprise came over his face to see me. I had obviously interrupted something important - something I could not understand. His lips moved, but he did not stop his silent prayers; and I left the room more quietly than I had entered. Now, years later, as his trembling hands placed these same straps on my arm and head, I understood. He was sincerely and all of his life binding himself to G-d. And he was hoping through ritual and tradition that I would do the same.

This bind was real to my father. We never talked about what his relationship to G-d meant to him. That wasn't his way. But I know it was real. When he wrapped his left arm and placed the box close to his heart, he felt G-d's presence. It was a relationship of obligation. Never did he ask what G-d would do for him. Never did he ask why he had suffered loss and pain: the murder of his mother by Arab terrorists when he was little more than a bar mitzvah boy himself, and the family disruption and disbursal that followed. Never did he ask why G-d had allowed his wife to suffer in the Nazi extermination camps, or why G-d had chosen her alone for survival. No, for this *chased* who grew up in the holy town of Tzvat in northern Israel, the question on his lips was not "what do I want from G-d" but "what does G-d want from me?" The ties of the *t'fillin* were the ties that bound him to G-d. Wrapped in his safe *tallit*, with a sign upon his hand and frontlets before his eyes, his binding to the Holy One was made clear and apparent, even to an interrupting child.

(TAKING OFF T'FILLIN)

I continued the tradition for a time. I went to a Jewish summer camp where we post-bar mitzvah boys were encouraged to pray daily wearing our ritual garb. We were men! I studied on my own the details of how left-handed individuals were to wear the *t'fillin*. I studied the intricate ceremonies of removal - as precise as the placing. I willed my young heart to the feeling of binding, of commitment of, relationship with the Divine. But it was not easy. Where for many around me, the natural ease of that relationship flowed - as it did for my father - my heart was full of doubt. I loved the rituals and maintained

¹ Hosea 2:21

them. But the question of what G-d wanted from me was clouded. Who is this G-d? Does G-d actually exist and if so, how could I have a relationship with something so distant, so "other?" How could I even know what G-d wanted from me?

I was not alone in that doubt. I am not alone. Many of us struggle with a concept of G-d which is so different from everything else we experience. "*Adonai Echad*" we pray - "G-d is One." Not just singular but exceptional; beyond metaphoric comparison because, being unique, the only analogy for G-d is G-d. How helpful is that? It can be a handy way of saying - "don't ask, just believe." For me, with my rebellious and stubborn spirit, that is a recipe ripe for doing the opposite: "Don't ask, just believe?" How about: "Don't just believe, ask!" That was more my way. Perhaps it is for you as well. I took off those bindings, that leather strap of empty ritual and placed it back in its bag. And there it remained, unopened for years.

Religious belief and ritual can feel like that sometimes. A relic. A past that was meaningful in some old world, but not part of our modern sensibilities. We are too sophisticated for that. A recent Pew study report of American Judaism² confirmed it. While an amazing 94% percent of American Jews expressed great pride at being Jewish, 22% - nearly 1 in 5 – identified themselves as having "no religion." I would have been one of them. Again, maybe you would, too. But here we are! What does it mean to define ourselves as "not religious" and yet come to the synagogue? The rituals mean something, even if we can't define them. We are praying somehow, even if we don't know to whom we are praying.

It was like that for me. Sure Jewish ritual meant a lot to me, the prayers were comforting, the melodies familiar. Even as I grew older I still loved the taste of cookies at the *Oneg* – and I knew I had to sit through services in order to get them. But I gave little thought to who I was praying. I wanted to understand how the world and nature worked and Science was the clear path for knowledge. Art, Literature and especially Drama gave me an exploration of human character and the desires that drive our nature. Psychology and philosophy gave me an insight into the multiple modes of human thought. I followed those paths with vigor. Ritual and G-d increasingly fell away. I was content in a godless world.

Now, this is the part of the story where the speaker traditionally describes a sudden epiphanial experience, often brought on by a tragic loss or trauma. The writer Sam Harris, himself a dedicated atheist and anti-religious activist, is reported to have had a

² "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" October 1, 2013; <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

recent spiritually profound experience walking in the footsteps of Jesus in the Galilee. It's how the story is supposed to go. In fact, I may be under contractual obligation to report such an experience myself. I'll check. But the reality is, that is not what happened to me.

For me it was a growing, nagging sense of emptiness - the loneliness of a world devoid of meaning. The philosopher Viktor Frankel speaks of human beings as "meaning-makers." We are, it seems, constantly on a search. Restless. Uncertain. At least, I know I was. Perhaps you've had that feeling as well. A moment in time when you could look at your life, your knowledge, your experiences, your restless pursuits and ask: "Is that all?"

For me, it was not all. I looked back at what was meaningful. I found myself in quiet places. But my agitation did not, would not, let me be still. It was not until I entered rabbinic school and began to reacquaint myself with the ancient texts of our people that I began to feel a Divine presence, a holiness inspiring me to be better than I am. For me, G-d was not in the thunder or the hurricane or the fire - but in the *kol d'mama daka* - the still small voice. It was not G-d who led me to become a rabbi, it was the rabbi in me who led me to find G-d.

It is not easy, and I do struggle. And that, I think is the point: we struggle. You do not have to be a rabbi to find G-d. In fact maybe the point is different entirely. Maybe I didn't find G-d - maybe I allowed G-d to find me. Maybe it is about opening yourself to the possibility - however unlikely it may be - that holiness happens.

This summer I celebrated my second decade as a rabbi. In those 20 years I have counselled and consoled many people. Most often the issues confronted are more human than divine. But there are times when people come to us in spiritual crisis. I've met with people in pain and loss wondering where G-d is. I've sat with people in the last moments of life wondering what, if anything, lies beyond. I've spoken with Bar Mitzvah students who did not think they could go through with the ceremony because they did not believe in G-d. I've even met potential converts who were afraid to enter Judaism because they did not believe in G-d. I recently heard it expressed so well: "Judaism is a religion that requires you to believe only in one god. Or less." I can relate to that. While G-d was absent from my life, Judaism - and Jewish pride - never was. I think some of those I counsel are afraid that I - THE RABBI - will condemn them for their lack of faith. But that is not the Jewish way. We are a people of struggle. We argue about everything - why not G-d? As is often said, our name is Yisrael - literally "the one who struggles with G-d." Like our namesake ancestor Jacob, we are G-d wrestlers. Not static believers. It is not doubt that worries me - it is certainty! Certainty in G-d's presence - certainty in G-d's absence. Both sides of the same coin. If you are certain, you are not

thinking - you are not struggling. At least that is the case for me. I feel most vital in my relationship with G-d when I am examining my own beliefs - doubting myself. But I am most fulfilled in my relationship with G-d when I allow those doubts and certainties to subside for a time - and to just let our relationship be. These are the times of humility and gratitude when the only thought for the moment is "Thank you."

It wasn't just Jewish texts that led me back to G-d. That is too cerebral. It was the combination of humility and gratitude which opened the path. Humility is not an easy thing for us humans. We are too proud of our accomplishments. I wrote some of these words on a cross-country flight - and it is easy to be so very impressed with the technological prowess that lifts me high above the clouds, soaring like some giant eagle - only with my iPad out so I can work on my writings. We sure are impressive beings. And a little boring. But as I often say, religion teaches us humility. It reminds us constantly that we are not all there is - not the greatest force in the universe. And it is only with humility that we can experience gratitude. With humility we can acknowledge that we do not deserve all the good, all the beauty, all the wonder that we receive. But we can appreciate it - and we can be grateful for it.

As I said, it was not G-d who led me to be a rabbi, it was being a rabbi - opening myself up to spirituality, opening my eyes to the world and my ears to Torah - that led me to G-d. And it was in opening myself that I found something more profound – that G-d had been waiting for me. You see, the *t'fillin* is not just a symbol of binding oneself to the Holy One – the midrash tells us that G-d also binds to us. *T'fillin* are a physical manifestation of a metaphysical contact and contract. We – G-d and human - are bound, connected. And for me, having found that connection gave me strength when I was, years later, in a place of devastation. I was weak and frightened when illness threatened our daughter's young life. But I was never abandoned, never alone.

מִמְעַמְקִים קְרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה: - *Out of the depths I cry to you, O G-d* ³. And there I learned: G-d was bound to me, as I was bound to G-d. Had I not already built that tie, I would not have had the relationship to call on in my time of need.

But as a rabbi - now in my 20th year - I will say this to you: I don't want you to believe in G-d as I do. I don't want you to believe because I said you should. I invite you to experience G-d as you do. As you can. I want you not to be certain in your belief or disbelief. I want you to doubt, I want you to struggle. I want you to open yourself up to possibility. I want you to be inspired. I want the words of Torah to soften your heart, I want the holiness of Shabbat to shock you with quiet. I want the awe of this Awesome

³ Ps. 130:1

day, this awesome space, this remarkable music, this ancient liturgy to help you feel there is something more. I want the sound of the shofar we are about to hear to rock our complacency. Don't accept G-d - struggle with G-d. But be willing to engage in the struggle. Don't be so sure of yourself. Let G-d be sure of you.

For some years, it was my habit to return to the *t'fillin* daily. Early in the morning, before anyone awoke, I would wrap those ancient straps about my arm. I would smell the worn leather and feel the weight of the wooden box on my head and the one pressing into my side, as I silently chanted the morning prayers. Sometimes I would remember the newly minted bar mitzvah boy being instructed in his prayers. More often I would remember what it means to bind myself to the Divine presence. It was a daily commitment: not to certainty, but to attempt - this day - to be humble enough to be ready for G-d. I ask in those moments - like my father before me - not what do I want from G-d, but what does G-d want from me? And I pray to live up to those expectations. You don't need *t'fillin*, you don't need to physically bind. But you do need to open your heart. Struggle when you must. Pray when you can. Allow yourself to let G-d find you. I have fallen away from that habit. But perhaps now it is time to come back.

(HOLDING OUT T'FILLIN)

Will you join me?