

## Noa Kushner, *The Kitchen*

First Day Rosh Hashanah

September 29, 2016 / Rosh Hashana 5777

1.

When Abraham was a baby they say he wandered outside. Back then, God hadn't caught on yet. Young Abraham wandered outside and looks up. He sees the moon, he sees the stars. Everyone at that time prayed to these glorious bodies of light. But when the sun sets, and then the moon sets, Abraham realizes there must be something else, something beyond either of these things, something that created these things, and he has a feeling of "not finding." A feeling like, "I can't quite put my finger on it, but something is not there."

But we learn, it is precisely in his "not finding" that the presence of God was first revealed to him.<sup>1</sup>

A Hasidic rebbe thousands of years later will think of this story and say, "Sometimes what needs to be revealed begins with the *not-finding*."<sup>2</sup>

If anyone had a moment this year where you looked at your news feed or front page and asked yourself, "How is this possible? How did we get to *this* as a country? How did we come to this in our history? How did we get to this election? this violence? this level of disparity between one neighborhood and another? If you had a moment that was disorienting, like looking for your glasses in the morning, if you had a moment like, "Am I missing something? Did that really just happen? What am I not seeing?"

Then you, too, have had a moment of "not-finding."

What are we not finding? What have we lost?

I believe what's missing is the dream of justice that underlies every interaction that we have in our society.

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<sup>1</sup> Bet HaMidrash 2:118-196

<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, "The Road to Perfection," *Tales of the Hasidim*, 2:225

And that disoriented, “something is missing” feeling we have is nothing less than our realization that our collective dream that guides how we treat one another in this country has fallen trampled by the wayside, and there is serious work to be done if we’re to reclaim it.

This year, I found myself wishing for a simpler time (at least it was simpler in my head) when I felt justified in writing about a single issue for the high holidays. Gun violence. Racism. Prison reform. Education. But this year, every time I started to read and write about an issue, I couldn’t help but be led into others.

You can’t talk about police reform without talking about race. You can’t talk about race without talking about affordable housing and jobs. You can’t talk about jobs until you deal with education and prison reform.

That’s because no treatment of one particular outcrop of symptoms is going to render the body whole. I have come to believe we have to rehabilitate nothing less foundational than how we’re supposed to live together in the first place, our dream.

You see, there’s a relatively simple dream that everyone -- no matter where we live, or who our parents are, no matter where we’re from, our race, or where we are on the gender spectrum, or who we love -- would have access to opportunity and education and security and the possibility of living a dignified life, a life where meaning is a possibility.

The dream is that in our walking from the Tenderloin to downtown we would not feel we were traveling between *two radically different countries* with completely different social and economic conditions.<sup>3</sup>

That in going from East Palo Alto to Palo Alto, from Tiburon to Marin City, there would not be a *vast and unbridgeable gap* in how people live or learn or work.

This dream is often described in economic terms, and that’s easiest to see, but it is also a moral dream, a righteous and religious dream, one that originates in Torah. A dream that says we determine our collective worth based on how we treat the most vulnerable among us.

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<sup>3</sup> See: Thomas Fuller, “What San Francisco says about America,” NY Times, September 16, 2016.

There are times when we've realized big pieces of this dream in our history but lately I worry we've forgotten it altogether.

Instead of the real dream, we've defaulted into participating in a lesser dream, an ersatz dream, a dream that uses the words of our real thing but carries none of its weight or significance.<sup>4</sup>

In the fake version of the dream things like security and learning and opportunity and dignity exist but they are for lucky us only, lucky us and the precious few people who beat the odds. The ersatz dream may allow us to pretend to ourselves that we are whole, but even we, the lucky ones, we know the truth.

When the wife of the great Ba'al Shem Tov died, he told his students, "I always thought I would fly to heaven after her on the strength of my grief like the great prophet Elijah. But," he said with sadness, "without her, I am only half a body and so this is no longer possible."<sup>5</sup>

When we understand that vast numbers of people in our country cannot be sure they'll make it through the week without getting shot, arrested, or physically harmed in some way, let alone get to school or work or have an opportunity to make a contribution to society, it is like realizing that we as a country only have half a body. We can pretend it won't affect our ability to function as a society but if we're honest, we realize it already has.

We can only use one arm, part of a leg, half an eye. Worse, we've acclimated to our condition. We keep our collective head down, away from trying to reach or claim any piece of the old, real dream.

2.

Before Moses had a career as a sea-splitter, before he started talking Pharaoh down, Moses lived in Daddy Pharaoh's palace.

How did he get there? Well, maybe you heard about the two midwives (were they Egyptian or Hebrew, it's not entirely clear) who risked their careers and

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<sup>4</sup> I was heavily influenced by Ta-Nehisi Coates' work in *Between the World and Me*, where he writes that the American dream is a lie.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Buber, "After the Death of his Wife," *Tales of the Hasidim*, Volume 1, p. 82.

their lives when they lied to Pharaoh's face and subverted his *very clear orders* to kill the baby Hebrew boys they delivered.

Not to mention Moses' mother who risked her life and the life of her family: she raises Moses secretly until she can't hide him anymore and then puts him in that basket in the Nile, in the reeds, watching from afar, praying he will make it.

Or how about *the princess*, Pharaoh's daughter who risks her very position and standing in the palace to save that baby Moses to bring him inside (not only to basic safety but to) the VIP, inner circle.<sup>6</sup>

Now Pharaoh was famous for having a totalitarian grip on the reality that was his Egypt – he was the only author of every story – no counter narratives, certainly no dreams, and he went to a great extent to keep it that way. This is why these people (his own daughter!) who all undermined the system successfully are a great surprise, *the very existence of Moses is a great surprise*, Moses is an aberration that should never have happened, a Hebrew boy in Pharaoh's own palace!

But Moses doesn't know much if any of that back-story. Not yet. He just lives in the court in unexamined safety, thinking about palace politics, lunch, and ways to elevate and amuse himself.

This is not unlike how we in this country are the product of immigrants and risk takers, each of us with members of our own families who fought in wars and crossed oceans with nothing. We too are the product of those who came before us and risked their lives and reputations many times over so we could have what we have -- but really, we don't think about that too much, we don't consider that our very existence here is surprising, even miraculous, given our origins and what happened to many other families during that same period in history. No, we don't often think in terms of those debts.

Instead we too surround and distract ourselves in a hipster paradise with a lot of things that are supposed to be fancy by not being fancy. (Wine served in jam jars, I'm talking to you.) We complain about our daily tasks that keep us very busy. And we work our rank in the palace of America, big time.

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<sup>6</sup> See Exodus 1: 15-20, 2:1-10, With gratitude to Noam Ben-Zion who taught from these texts in his lesson: "Resisting Oppression" through the Shalom Hartmann Institute.

Moses, like us, in his laissez faire early days, seems to passively accept that there are slaves and masters in his world. He doesn't imagine he is part of the problem. Nor do we. Judging by our actions, or lack thereof, judging by how we actually spend our time and money and power and position in society -- while it may indeed pain us when we read about the latest desperation down the street, in the next neighborhood -- on the whole, we don't really see ourselves as responsible, so we do little, and so, little changes.

I imagine, though, also like us, there are nights when Moses wakes up in a cold sweat. He knows, as we know, on a subterranean level that something is not right. As if some part of his body is missing. He goes back to sleep but he cannot dream. He sleeps but he does not find.

Right outside those walls where Moses lived, the slaves were waist high, working in mortar, the dirtiest and hardest of all jobs. Invariably, when the slaves would get thirsty and ask for water, the taskmasters would go and make a show of getting the workers gourds. The taskmasters would carry these gourds to the slaves carefully as if they were filled to the top with cool water but when they handed the gourds to the thirsty workers, it was a cruel trick -- Because the gourds were filled with nothing but air! The message was clear: The dream of justice is a joke.<sup>7</sup>

In Baba Metzia we learn there was a "claimant's stone" (like a lost and found) in Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> Anyone who lost something would turn there, and anyone who found a lost object would turn there. The finder would stand by [the stone] and announce [his find] and the owner would stand [by the stone] and give the [evidence of] identifying marks and take the object.<sup>9</sup>

Where do we go to find, to reconstruct our lost dreams? Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum of Jerusalem teaches that maybe we need a modern version of this stone, this lost and found, because these dreams we've lost we cannot find by ourselves.

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<sup>7</sup> I borrowed this image about a lack of hope from Shmot Rabba 27:1 (See note 4, Soncino edition)

<sup>8</sup> Baba Metiza 28b

<sup>9</sup> Translation by R. Tamar Elad Applebaum of Zion

I imagine Moses, after many nights, going to such a stone. He says, "I am secure in the palace but am beginning to think my security comes at a great cost. I think my security may be a façade. I can't put my finger on it but something has been lost, something big. I cannot find my dreams."

A Hebrew slave approaches the same stone. "I am missing water." She says. "The guards gave me another gourd filled with air today. I am missing hope. I have lost another son who was taken from me when Pharaoh commanded that all our babies be thrown in the Nile. I am not sure there is such a thing as a dream."

She looks up and it is only then that Moses realizes this Hebrew looks like him. As if he were looking in a mirror.

I imagine Moses going against palace protocol and giving that Israelite woman water. And in return, she whispers pieces of his own story to him: who his mother is, the midwives, the rebellion of Pharaoh's own daughter, the story that everyone in Egypt seems to know but him.<sup>10</sup>

Something begins to happen to Moses. Yes, he begins to know a part of himself for the first time. But now he starts to connect his losses to the many: the lost sons, the lost hope, the sleepless nights across the land, and it begins to dawn on him the magnitude of what the society has lost as a whole. The loss of half a body, the loss of aspiration and growth, for there is no dream to grow towards.

That night, when he opens his window, Moses hears the cries that have been there all along.

The *midrash* says he goes out and begins to help, he works side by side with those outside the palace, while inside the palace he lobbies Pharaoh to let them rest. It's a start.<sup>11</sup>

3.

Moses walked around his world for years as we do in ours. I have to imagine he heard the news, he saw the graphs of the disproportionate deaths in certain neighborhoods, the level of incarceration, the school to prison pipeline, the unequal dispensation of justice, he saw you tube videos and interviews and right

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<sup>10</sup> Ramban to Ex. 2:11. Some say, "They told him." Others say it was Jocheved,

<sup>11</sup> Shmot Rabbah 1:27-28.

out his door he saw slaves *every single day*, and still it was not enough to get him to leave the palace, to hear the cries. Moses *only shifted*, ever so slightly, when he learned where he was from, his story. Because when he learned that the way things *are* is not how they *were*, then he realized things might change yet again.

Maybe if graphs and evidence have yet to sway us to action, we too can be moved by the same story that the Hebrew whispered to Moses. Because Moses' story is quite literally yours and mine, it is our story. If Moses was raised by risk takers -- midwives with everything to lose but who fight nevertheless, mothers who don't take no for an answer, Egyptian princesses who have compassion and keys to power and aren't afraid to use either one -- by people in all levels of society risking their station in life, risking their power and privilege, then we must also claim those risk takers as *our chosen parents* because in the face of a complete and thorough society-wide denial of the dream of justice, these people kept it live, not just figuratively, but literally. Moses lived! And before Moses saw any burning bush, before any razzle-dazzle, these women put themselves on the line quietly and without fanfare. *This* is the beginning of *our* story, make no mistake, there would be nothing else without it.

And like these chosen parents, if we want to reclaim the dream, we're going to have to do more than talk. We'll certainly have to stop talking only to one another and people just like us (and I appreciate the irony of me saying this here in this room). We'll even have to go beyond talking with people who offer other perspectives. Because while talking is good, and reading books is good, and while posting and liking and clicking petitions is good, if we really want to reclaim this dream then we're each going to have to risk and act.

And, like these chosen parents who worked within whatever opportunities they were given, we're not going to be able to fly into entrenched, complicated, and painful societal problems and fix them unilaterally. (In fact, truth be told, Moses does just that later on and it is an unqualified disaster, this is another teaching for another time). No. We can't pretend that "we" have the solution for "their" problems, this just reinforces the very divisions that are tearing our society apart. If this is our dream, then it is all of our dream and it will require all of us owning the problem and all of us working to fix it, often in ways that aren't convenient, often in ways we might not *want* to fix it.

Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative calls this risk taking “making ourselves uncomfortable.” He writes, “...I’ve looked for examples where things changed, where oppression was ended, where inequality was overcome, when people did only what was convenient and comfortable, and I can’t find any examples of that. To change the world, we’re going to sometimes have to make uncomfortable choices, [and] to be in uncomfortable places.[.]”<sup>12</sup>

Believe me, at this point I’d love to be able to give you the defining list of uncomfortable places you need to go in 5777 for social change but no such list exists.

Sometimes these places are obvious, defining moments in life but more often they’re not. It might be as small as being faced with a question of whether to say something at a dinner party when you don’t really know enough to defend an opinion but it’s clear you’re the only one who will.

Or maybe it is quietly turning down a lucrative client or a contact because they are known for a lack of compassion regarding their employees.

Or it’s taking a risk on someone who has a far from spotless reputation but still deserves another chance, or it is getting involved on a controversial issue that will require constant explanation and will likely tarnish your reputation. Or it is sharing your hard earned resources with organizations and people that need it instead of going on that trip, buying that bauble – making your status a little less social media worthy, a little less shiny.

No, there’s no one sign pointing to uncomfortable places but you’ll know them when you see them. (And, please, if you need help finding them our Justice League is full of good people like you who don’t wait for the uncomfortable places, they go and seek them out.)

Because Stevenson’s right, there’s no way to get these things done and be everyone’s friend. There’s no way to get these things done without your heart pounding, without the probability of losing something in the short term.

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<sup>12</sup> Bryan Stevenson, “Death Row Attorney Bryan Stevenson on Four Ways to Fight Against Injustice,” Huffington Post, September 27, 2016.

But I am here to tell you that the larger dream, the dream of a just world where the body of our society has a chance to be rendered whole, this is more precious than any client, anything we could buy ourselves, any security or distraction or reputation.

And rehabilitating this dream is what we owe our ancestors, both our risk taker chosen parents from Torah and our immigrant great grandparents and grandparents, it is what we must be courageous enough to give to our children, all our children, not just the ones in our very own houses.

Not to mention pursuing this dream is our righteous obligation, it is nothing less than the difference between perpetuating slavery and fighting for greater freedom. It is our greatest story – it goes beyond the sun, beyond the moon and stars. We cannot let it go out.

#### 4. (Epilogue)

Finally, at long last, God, inspired by the acts of kindness and courage in Egypt, (from midwives to Moses) after many generations of being MIA, begins to come back to the scene.<sup>13</sup> I imagine God goes to the lost and found store night after night but there's no one there. God whispers, "I'm missing justice, one of my great gifts to the world. Isn't there anyone who wants to work to return my dream of justice?" God calls out but there is no one to answer. God just hears the cries of the slaves reverberate back and forth through the skies, the same cries Moses, a few others, now hear every night. But God, being God, carefully wraps up each of those cries and quietly carries them back to heaven. God doesn't give up on those cries. "Tomorrow, I'll come back and ask again," God thinks. "Maybe I'll find a few people tomorrow."

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<sup>13</sup> Shmot Rabbah 1:27