

Descent for the Sake of Ascent

*Sermon delivered by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, Congregation Beth Israel, North Adams, MA
at Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church, August 5, 2018*

In Hasidic tradition—in the Jewish mystical-devotional tradition that arose in Eastern Europe in the late 1700s—there is the concept of *yeridah tzorech aliyah*, "descent for the sake of ascent." We experience distance from God in order to draw close. We fall in order to rise.

The term "fall" may have connotations here, in this Christian context, that I don't intend. I'm not talking about the Fall of Man, with capital letters, as I understand it to be interpreted in some Christian theologies. Judaism doesn't have a doctrine of original sin. I'm talking about something more like...falling down. Falling short. Falling away.

The paradigmatic example of descent for the sake of ascent is the narrative at the end of the book of Genesis that we sometimes call "the Joseph novella." We just heard a piece of that story this morning, so here's a recap for those who need it. Jacob had twelve sons, and his favored son was Joseph, for whom he made a coat of many colors. Joseph had dreams of stars bowing down to him, sheaves of wheat bowing down to him, and his dreams made his brothers angry, and as a result they threw him into a pit. He literally *went down*. And then he was sold into slavery in Egypt, and the verb used there is again he went down: in Hebrew one "goes down" into Egypt and "ascends" into the promised land.

In Egypt, he fell from favor with Potiphar and went down into Pharaoh's dungeon. And there he met the two servants of Pharaoh for whom he interpreted dreams, and he ascended to become Pharaoh's right-hand man.

And because of *those* things, he was in a position to rescue his family from famine, thereby setting in motion the rescue of what would become the entire Jewish people. Descent for the sake of ascent.

His descendants would become slaves to a Pharaoh in Egypt for 400 years. Finally, our hardship was too much to bear, and we cried out to God. Torah tells us that God heard our cries and remembered us and brought us forth from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Because we were low and we cried out, God heard us and lifted us out of there: descent for the sake of ascent.

Coming forth from slavery was the first step toward Jewish peoplehood; receiving Torah at Sinai, and entering into covenant with God, was the event that formed us as a people. Our enslavement led to our freedom which led to covenant and peoplehood: descent for the sake of ascent.

The summer season on the Jewish calendar mirrors this same trajectory. Just a few weeks ago we marked the day of communal mourning known as Tisha b'Av, the ninth day of the lunar month of Av, the lowest point in our year.

On Tisha b'Av, we remember the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon in 586 BCE. We remember the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem at the hands of Rome in 70 CE. We remember the start of the Crusades, the expulsion from the Warsaw Ghetto, an incomprehensibly awful litany of communal tragedies that have all, somehow, against all odds, befallen us on or around that same calendar date. On Tisha b'Av we fast, we hear the book of Lamentations, we read poems of grief, we dive deep into the world's sorrow and suffering and brokenness.

And, Jewish tradition says that on Tisha b'Av the messiah will be born. Out of our deepest grief comes the spark of redemption. And every year Tisha b'Av is the springboard that launches us toward the Days of Awe, the Jewish new year and the Day of Atonement, of at/one/ment. Authentic spiritual life demands that we sit both with life's brokenness and life's wholeness. A spirituality that's only "positive," only feel-good, isn't real and isn't whole. When we sit with what hurts, that's what enables us to rise. Descent for the sake of ascent.

The Hasidic master known as the Degel Machaneh Efraim teaches that ascent and descent are intimately connected. When a person falls away from God, the experience of distance from the Divine spurs that soul's yearning to return. Falling down is precisely the first step of rising up. Our mis-steps are precisely what spur us to course-correct and adjust our path. Descent for the sake of ascent.

Looking at the world around us, it's easy to feel that everything is falling apart. Migrant children torn from the arms of their parents and imprisoned in cages. Hate crimes on the rise. People of color killed by police who are supposed to be sworn to protect. Incidents of prejudice increasing: against religious minorities, and against transgender people, and against people of color. Our political system seems to be broken. International relations seem to be broken. There is brokenness everywhere we look.

Our work—the spiritual work of this moment in time—is twofold. One: we have to resist the temptation to paper over the brokenness with platitudes and pretty words, "God has a plan," or "everything's going to be okay." My theology does not include a God Who sits back and allows rights to be stripped away for the sake of some greater plan we don't have to try to understand. And two: we have to face the brokenness, even embrace the brokenness, and let it fuel us to bring repair. We have to make our descent be for the sake of ascent.

When we feel our distance from the divine Beloved, there's a yearning to draw near. Our hearts cry out, "I miss Your presence in my life, God, I want to come back to You." Or in the words of psalm 27, the psalm for this season on the Jewish calendar, "One thing I ask of You, God, this alone do I seek: that I might dwell in Your house all the days of my life!"

When we feel our distance from the world as it should be—a world where no one goes hungry, where bigotry has vanished like morning fog, where every human being is uplifted and cherished as a reflection of the Infinite divine—we yearn to bring repair. When we feel what's lacking, we ache to fill that void. Feeling how far we've fallen is precisely what spurs us to seek to rise. This is built into the very order of things. And that's where I find hope during these difficult days.

This is the work of spiritual life as I understand it. There are times that feel like a descent into the pit, a fall away from God, even imprisonment in Pharaoh's dungeon. This is true both on the small scale of every individual human life, and on the broader canvas of the nation or the world at large. But the thing about hitting bottom is, there's nowhere to go from there but up.

Our job is to inhabit every broken place, every spiritual exile, and let them fuel us to ascend closer to God and closer to the world as we know it should be. Then those who have sown in tears will reap in joy. Then those who went out weeping, carrying the seeds of the tomorrow in which they could barely find hope, will return in gladness bearing the abundant harvest of everything they need. *Kein yehi ratzon*: So may it be.