Darkening of the Light

When I was a twenty-seven-year-old photojournalist in El Salvador, I was on the way back to the capital, along the winding mountainous roads. As the taxi driver rounded a certain bend, I glanced in the rear view mirror. We were being closely followed by a dark Jeep Wagoner with wood paneling and tinted windows and a rifle was poking out the back window—a death squad.

I slowly curled down into the back seat and prayed to every name of God I could think of. The one prayer I knew by heart was 'Sh'ma'—the great prayer of the Jewish people. A few years later, I visited the Navajo reservation and Monument Valley, where my exposure to Navajo spirituality and my understanding is greatly enhanced in the light of that exposure—and I see no difference in speaking to God in the Navajo language, and do and harmony must be re-grounded in spirit.

As a child, somewhere I had picked up this idea of God as a sort of Santa Claus, who kept an eye on my drives and desires, which of course never really made much sense. My only connection to the spiritual in Judaism as a child, to something that spoke to my higher self, was in an outdoor evening prayer service at camp. While we sat on wooden benches in the darkness the fireflies came out, and while listening to the service I reached out with my senses to feel the trees, the night, the stars. That experience probably comes closer to what I believe is meant in the Sh'ma, and yet at best to speak of God and of knowing what God is presents a paradox.

The best in Judaism—is its ethics, its pluralism, and its flexibility—originate, I think, in its awareness of the sacred in everything. I now understand, most importantly, that in Judaism “the Lord is One” in the Sh’m'a does not especially or even necessarily refer to an anthropomorphic God on high. As learned Jewish scholar Arthur Kurzweil writes in Kabbalah for Dummies (not at all for dummies): “The prayer is rich with meaning, every word having layers of significance. But the essence of the prayer is a meditation on the oneness of the universe: God is One, everything is God, everything is One.” Very simple!

That of course is not to say things cannot get out of balance. They can and do and harmony must be restored—in Navajo cosmology, patterned after the sacred pattern of the natural world—and upon occasion I have been privileged to attend all-night sings. That Kabbalistic approach feels akin to what we have dismissed in Native American traditions, and different.

For a few years later, I was on assignment again and interviewed Frank Morgan, Navajo philosopher, cultural linguist, and educator, who would become my life partner. I moved to New Mexico, where my exposure to Navajo culture and spirituality developed. As my sense of connection to the spiritual grew, so finally did my interest in learning more about Judaism. At this point I encountered Rabbi Gershon Winkler, whose interest in Native American teachings opened the door to my renewed interest in Judaism.

Grounded in Spirit

The part that had tripped me up, that part about ‘the Lord is One’—which I had associated with the word ‘monotheism’ and an anthropomorphic God, had always presented a block to me. I see now as a misunderstanding born of a matter of translation into a Christian culture: the words, especially in English, simply don’t do justice to Judaism.

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