

**Rabbi Zach Fredman**  
**Kindling Desire**

**The Beginning of the World**

Rosh Hashanah is the celebration of the beginning of the world, and so we will begin with the story of the beginning of the world, as it is told in the tradition of Isaac Luria, the Lion of Sefat. In Luria's version of the story, creation begins before creation. Luria imagines that before the world is created, God is alone. And God fills up everything; there is no space that is not imbued with the fullness of the divine presence. And then something happens - within that perfect Being there occurs something we call *ratzon*. *Ratzon* - desire or will, occurs within the Godhead.

God desires to be seen. God desires not only that Spirit exist in the world, but also that it be recognized, and praised. But God cannot see God's self - so what does God do? God creates the world. The Holy Blessed One breathes in, so as to occupy a space less than the All, creating a void, in which the fullness of the world can exist. The world begins with this - *ratzon* - desire, will.

Finally, God places spirit in vessels that will form the things of creation. But in the act of planting heavenly light in earthly vessels, a shattering occurs, a breaking, because the vessels cannot quite hold the light that God wished to place within them. And so Luria tells us, it is our task to continue to repair the brokenness, to make *tikkun olam*, to restore the world to its original wholeness.

**Returning to the Creational Spark**

In the past weeks of the month of Elul, and in the coming days, we will engage in the process of *teshuva*, the work of repentance, renewal and return. Rav Kook, one of the great modern minds in Jewish thought, describes *teshuva* in this unexpected manner. Rav Kook says, that the entirety of the work of *teshuva*, all of the spiritual work that we will engage in leading up to Yom Kippur, is a process of returning to *ratzon* - desire, will.

The world began with a single feeling bubbling up in the divine mind. The divine Oneness wanted to be two, wanted to be seen by something outside itself, to be recognized, and to be praised. God wanted to play Hide-and-Seek. This spark in the Godhead which birthed the world, exists within each of us, because we are, each of us, a piece of creation. The task of *teshuva* then, is to reconnect to the desire of the inner spark, because it is that spark, the *nikuda pnimit*, the inner point - which is endowed with the power to create the world.

## **Nikuda Pnimit**

The presence of this inner point can continue-on, unnoticed within us. And then all of a sudden it perks up - as an ember when poked - glows. I feel it when playing music with friends - a glance, and then we meet at the crescendo, it is there. I feel it when a deep truth reveals itself out of the midst of a seemingly ordinary conversation. Occasionally when biting into a cupcake, or the first deep breath of the morning, with a cup of coffee on a new york city bench.

## ***Ratzon* - Desire/Will**

*Ratzon* - the one Hebrew word means both desire, and will. In English the word desire tends to be associated with the body, and the word, will, tends to be associated with the mind. *Ratzon* is a spiritual yearning that incorporates the entire chain of longing - body, mind, and soul.

We tend to understand the body's yearnings as natural - self-occurring. Whereas the mind's will comes not of its own accord, but must be *willed*, as if some puppet-master is playing our strings. *Ratzon* transcends this dichotomy - it is an active yearning that comes from within.

But because this yearning comes from the creational spark which carries with it the memory of brokenness - there is a hunger, an incompleteness in this yearning. The broken piece longs to be made whole. To be hungry is to be acquiring, always moving toward. And thus, through our collective existence, the world operates forward on yearning. The world leans forward. If it wasn't for yearning, it wouldn't lean forward.

## **(Yearnings)**

We yearn for meaning - we go to school, to shul, to yoga, to the movies, to coffee's with friends, we open books, and turn on podcasts in a grand search for meaning. As much as we have discovered as post-moderns and digital-agers, there is still so little we know about our place and purpose in the world. We long for our lives to exist in spheres of meaning and purpose.

We yearn to create - we busy ourselves with jobs and activities, which pay the bills or bring a greater sense of wholeness to the world, or both. But beneath all of that is a yearning to emulate the God of Genesis, which speaks "let there be light," and there is light. We long to make the world a better place, to do *tikkun olam*, so that our descendants inherit a world of blessing.

We yearn for love - we yearn for faces, whose likeness has long been painted upon our hearts, to return our gaze like a mirror, and say "I love you," without words. We yearn for communion, to know that the depths of our soul can be felt and known in the world outside of ourselves.

And we yearn for transcendence - it is not possible to move through life believing we are only ants. In fact, the metaphor of the dragon seems far more apt; the dragon is the eagle and the

snake, the sky and the ground wrapped into one. We are creatures, who straddle heaven and earth. With feet on the ground our ladders reach for heaven.

### **The Girl in the Tower**

The Zohar, the 13<sup>th</sup> century master-work of Jewish mysticism offers this parable. A girl is in the tower and she is looking for her beloved, her lover. Her lover walks back and forth underneath the window of the tower looking for her, lifting his eyes to every side. Knowing that her lover hovers about her gate constantly, what does she do? She peaks and she hides. She opens the window in the tower, revealing her face, then swiftly withdraws, concealing herself. No one else near him sees her, only the lover, and his heart and his soul and everything within him flows out to her. Why does she make herself so unavailable? To awaken more love in him. The Zohar says, you must all become pursuers of your beloved. *To awaken more love in him.*

The world is a great game of cosmic Peek-a-Boo. We are all convinced that the wonder in the child's eye disappears, as he grows. We are convinced that the game is worthless because, I can reach out and touch the one who is hiding. In fact that which separates us from the beloved, real or imagined, great or insignificant, exist only for the purpose of kindling desire. The Zohar reminds us that we should not leave this children's game behind.

You could say New York City itself generates the feeling that life is elusive - we miss the train, we're late to a meeting, we're behind schedule. "Do you want to have lunch on Friday?" "O I can't, I have a million things to do." And the time is gone, before you ever held it in your hands. The elusiveness is a blessing, not a burden - moments of truth, peeking and hiding, *to awaken more love in him.*

### **Dis/eased Yearnings**

If we understand yearning, as an active notion, a practice that must constantly be tended-to - there are two ways in which our yearning becomes diseased. The first is overexposure. It is the beloved's dancing between presence and absence which stirs the yearning of the lover - he sees her, and then he doesn't, and he yearns to see her again. If she leans out the window and stays there indefinitely, the lover cannot yearn for her in her absence.

We live in an age of instant gratification, an age of fast food and on-demand. At the touch of a button, the thing we want is downloaded to our devices, placed instantly before our eyes. The way in which the world is linked-up is not in itself problematic. The problem is in the moment that we now skip over. The moment between - I want to hear that song, and the music arriving at my ear - is such an important moment. There is desire in that moment, and there is imagination; there is the imagined meeting of the beloved, whatever the beloved may be - a song, a cheeseburger, or a friend. And sometimes the imagined union is even more beautiful than the world as it happens in real time. The moment between, is where our inner lives - the life of the soul, can thrive. If at every moment, we choose the world outside over the world within, we are making a constant sacrifice. We miss the possibility of turning within, to kindle the sparks.

Where this first symptom of spirit is more prevalent in our culture, its counter may be more profound. The lover beneath the tower sees the beloved in the tower, and then he doesn't. Her absence is prolonged, and he becomes disheartened. Eventually he stops looking for her entirely; he forgets her face, and he forgets his yearning.

We forget what it means to yearn - for the big stuff. We walk to work half asleep, we play with half a heart. Every moment contains within it the possibility of being everything, or nothing. Every moment exists within spheres of meaning, and it is up to us to make it everything or nothing. Making a beautiful dinner, using inherited recipes from a grandparent, can be an action that sustains the world - or it can be a chore. Then again, eating the dinner can also be a chore, lemon chicken, shabbos after shabbos after shabbos.

### **Joseph and Zuleika**

Here's a story from our tradition that also appears in the Quran, though it is read in a wildly different way. When Joseph is thrown into a pit, and sold into slavery by his brothers - he ends up in Egypt, in the house of Potiphar, a steward of the Pharaoh. In Egypt, Joseph is met by Potiphar's wife; she is bewildered by Joseph's beauty, and she throws herself upon him. In the rabbinic commentaries, Joseph is praised for his refusal of Potiphar's wife - he is held up as a model of chastity.

The Sufis, the mystics of Islam, read this story in a wildly different manner. Zuleika, as she comes to be called, becomes the model for our own yearning. The poet Rumi writes,

(The Phrasing Must Change)

Learn about your inner self from those who know such things,  
but don't repeat verbatim what they say.  
Zuleika let everything be the name of Joseph, from celery seed  
to aloes wood. She loved him so much she concealed his name  
in many different phrases, the inner meanings  
known only to her. When she said, *The wax is softening  
near the fire*, she meant, My love is wanting me.  
Or if she said, *Look, the moon is up* or *The willow has new leaves*  
or *The branches are trembling* or *The coriander seeds  
have caught fire* or *The roses are opening*  
anything she praises, it's Joseph's touch she means,  
any complaint, it's his being away.  
When she's hungry, it's for him. Thirsty, his name is a sherbet.  
Cold, he's a fur. This is what the Friend can do  
when one is in such love.

Of course the goal is for one's yearning to be for God, but Zuleika is lauded, because she is consumed by yearning - and the emphasis is on the yearning itself, not the object that we yearn for. Zuleika's yearning, infuses every aspect of her life with meaning and aliveness.

Once the spark of the beloved is lit, it spreads like wildfire through all of the work of her hands. The shining that occurs within will not be content with containment in the heart. This is the child who knows nothing other than Star Wars or Harry Potter; it is the one who reads nothing but Nietzsche, and the one who copies Calder mobiles late into the hours of the night. This is the nature of this kind of light; it wants to illuminate all of the dark places of the world.

### **Every Hunger is a Hunger for the Beloved; Every Yearning is a Yearning for the Source.**

Elsewhere, Rumi imagines us as reeds swaying in the reed-bed, until one day we are cut from our home in the reed bed, and made into flutes - instruments for wind songs. Every day, we sing a song of longing, of yearning, because we have been cut from our source, and we long to return. Understood in this manner - our yearnings are not chains which bind us to the smallness of this worldly existence, but rather they are constant reminders of our true nature - our connection to the Source. We in fact, are still God's vessels of light.

### **The Practice: Love the Love**

For just a moment, let's engage in the practice. So much of our love in the world, is a love of an other. We love our friends, parents, children, spouses, dogs, houses, guitars, mandolins, ouds. Sometimes we are separated from our beloved, by distance imagined or real. But what exists even when the object of our affection is gone or far away - is the love itself. And the love itself is worthy and capable of receiving love. So that is what we are going to do for just a moment - love the love. Choose one person whom you love. As we breathe over the course of the next 60 seconds or so - with each breath, focus on loving all of the love that exists between you and him or her.

*Shana Tova* - May you be blessed with a year of sweetness, love, longing, beauty, wholeness, health, happiness, blessing, and light.