

Fragments, Books, Faces

I am unpacking my library... The books are not yet on the shelves, not yet touched by the mild boredom of order... Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate, that suffuses the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books... if there is a counterpart to the confusion of a library, it is the order of its catalogue.

Walter Benjamin wrote this essay, "Unpacking My Library," in 1931. He goes on, in his kind of Marxist fashion: Thus there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order.¹

Less than ten years later, the pole of disorder – in the name of fascist order - will have swept across Europe, and Benjamin himself would be dead, mid-flight across the Pyrenees.

We are well aware of the ways in which life and fate can swing between the poles of order and disorder. Has anyone checked their 401K lately? Does anyone still *have* a 401K? There are times for weeping, and there are also times for celebrating – which is what we will do tomorrow evening at the Or Chadash Gala. It will also be an opportunity to applaud the many contributions that Susan Jacobson has made to our congregation – as board member, President, Torah reader, and much more.

Susan is herself a collector, as you know if you have seen the walls of her apartment, where she – with Elaine's help, or at least Elaine's support, or at least Elaine's toleration – has hung a great variety of antique utensils and implements. But I also want to celebrate Susan as librarian (and lately, as docent) – one who brings useful order to the chaotic sprawl of human knowledge and creativity.

Our library, the Jewish library, begins with the Torah readings of recent weeks. This beginning is intensified this week, as Moses takes our

¹ Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library" (1931), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken, 1969), pp. 59-60.

first written document – words inscribed on stone tablets – and smashes it. We might think of this as symbolizing the fragmentation and dispersion of knowledge. The Covenant, represented by the splintered tablets, is broken before it can even be enacted. All the effort of Jewish tradition since then has been bent toward the project of re-collecting, organizing, interpreting, and expanding Torah.

The passage Susan has just read comes in the section that relates part of Moses' effort to reconstitute what has been shattered. God has made some demands, but Moses has some demands of his own:

Let me know your ways!

God says, If my Facing-Presence goes with you, will that satisfy you?

Moses: If your Facing-Presence does not go with us, then let's not go!

God: OK, I'll do what you say.

Moses: Let me see your Glory!

God: I'll pass my goodness before you, but you cannot see my face.

Now, is this the same God and the same Moses who were described just a few verses earlier as talking face to face? And now, you cannot see My face? There is a phenomenon known in Hebrew as *hester panim*, the hiding of God's face. I suppose it has its origin in this passage, though it usually has the sense of the fearful absence of God. The Psalmist says *Histarta fanecha hayiti nivhal* - You hid your face; I was terrified (Ps. 30:8). Last week, in our Shabbat morning discussion, we connected *hester panim* to the name Esther, and wondered aloud about God's absence from the Purim Megillah. Some have described the Holocaust as an instance of *hester panim*. The divine face, which no one can see and live, is even more terrifying when it is absent.

Maimonides insists that the word *panim* has a number of different meanings, and it clearly means "presence" as often as it literally means "face." Susan Handelman points out (as have others) that "The verbal root *panah* [related to *panim*, face] in Hebrew connotes a "turning" towards something, and also a kind of personal presence."²

What happens when God places Moses in a cleft in the rock, takes away the divine hand, and allows Moses to "see my back, but my face shall not be seen"? It has been suggested that, if Moses sees God's back, this must mean that Moses is facing in the same direction as God. He is facing the

²Handelman, Susan. "Facing the Other: Levinas, Perelman, and Rosenzweig" in Summoning: Ideas of the Covenant and Interpretive Theory, ed. Ellen Spolsky. (Albany, SUNY Press, 1993), 50.

people, and that is who God also is facing. Thus the point is not Moses' intimate experience of the divine presence, his own personal mystical head-trip. The point is that such an encounter must always turn one, face one, toward other people.

And God's Presence does not stand still. It passes by and proclaims:

Adonai Adonai El rahum ve-hanun erekh-apayim v'rav hesed v'emet... YHWH, YHWH, God, showing-mercy, showing-favor, long-suffering in anger, abundant in loyalty and faithfulness, keeping loyalty to the thousandth (generation), bearing iniquity, rebellion and sin, yet not clearing, clearing (the guilty), calling-to-account the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons and upon sons' sons, to the third and fourth (generation)! [34:6-7, Fox trans.]

As Everett Fox says, "All that is ventured here is a statement of God's essence, or, more precisely, of his essence for human beings: merciful but just"³. And, as the prophet Micah glosses this passage: "You have been told what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justly, love mercy, and walk modestly with your God" [6:8]. As God is just and merciful, so should you be.

We are collectors – of history and memory, of rules and regulations. We are activists, who want to assemble the broken fragments of human events into a better world, a world worthy of God's presence. In a time when all information – and lots of dis-information – seems to be floating in cyberspace, a few clicks away, we still wonder where wisdom is to be found. Who are the librarians of the future, who will struggle to bring useful order to exponentially growing information? Who are the justice-doers of the future, who will lovingly mend the millions of shards into the wholeness that God hopes for? We are the ones to show the next generation that a library, especially our library of Torah, is more than just a static collection – it is a guide to doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God – a Guide that does not stand still.

³Fox, Everett. The Five Books of Moses, A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary and Notes. (New York, Schocken, 1995), p. 450.