

Covenantal Tug

*Rabbi Jonathan Perlman
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Murray is praying in shul alone one day, and finally calls out to God, "I'm a good pious man Lord, so why must I be poor and destitute." God answers him, and says that he is sorry and he will be the next winner of the million dollar lottery. "Thank You my Lord," cries the old man. But months pass, and the winners are never him. Finally alone back in shul, he calls out to God once again, "What happened God... did I misunderstand you, didn't you say I'd be the next winner of the lottery." And God answers "Help me out, Murray, at least buy a ticket!"

We are so drawn into popular notions of what constitutes God's voice that many of us can only conceive of God talking to us in a big booming dramatic voice. Though it is true that popular culture took its cue from the Bible with God calling out to Abraham and speaking the Ten Commandments in a voice that strips the bark from the trees, there are alternative stories about the way God speaks to us. The most well known is the story of the prophet Elijah who escapes with his life from King Ahav and runs into the desert seeking comfort and protection from God. There is a sound and light show for Elijah in desert yet the Bible tells us that God was not in the earthquake, God was not in the thunder, God was in the fire, when every thing was silent, God spoke to Elijah in a small, quiet voice. Though our imaginations run wild with God speaking from storms, today I want to talk about God of the small, quiet voice. Because if we are ever going to be serious Jews in our lives, we need to pay attention to the impressions God creates in our experience. I believe that God talks to us through these impressions. We feel it when don't overanalyze what happens to us in our physical being. A thought comes to us that is true and right and we dismiss it or try to not let it bother us. An impression is felt from the corner of our eye; a tug that creates a feeling. Perhaps we know that through our intervention, we will set something right. We instinctively know that the commandment falls on us and we are called to obey and obey quickly.

I call these impressions "covenantal tugs" -- covenantal because they pull at us from the mysterious bond that we have with our God, a pull that was set into the soul of Abraham our oldest ancestor who first agreed that his descendents would be obligated by an agreement that would be connected with a penchant for justice, an instinct for doing right and acting for the well being of others, a decision-making process that is respectful and generous and exudes lovingkindness. When we have impressions that tug at us, when we have the opportunity to do a favor, giving a coworker a ride home or doing an errand for someone to help him save time in his day. When we feel called upon to help someone find something in a complicated store or to ease the pain of a friend who is suffering by holding their hand, we respond to a covenantal tug that runs so deep in our psyche that at first we cannot know exactly what we are being asked to do. But because you are a Jew, it is part of you, hardwired into our hearts and minds so it defies logic or rational thought. God calls us to make the first move and we might dismiss the feeling saying to ourselves, "I am not strong enough or someone else can do it or I know, God, but I just don't want to because it is so inconvenient and afterall what reward will I get for the extra effort of going through the motions?" We can talk ourselves out of it and make excuses until the tug goes away. These are small tests. And when we let that opportunity pass us, we fail the test, no matter how small it is, opening a door, giving someone the right of way, speaking kindly to a customer service employee. And when we pass these small tests, we will have practiced to accomplish will the larger tests of our lives. These are the small tests challenging our free will and when we respond in the positive, we propel ourselves forward in proving our true mettle as Jews. When we obey in the small, then God can entrust us to the much. The covenant -- the brit shel Avraham Avinu and its successor

Torah min hashamayim, revelation from Mt. Sinai-- is what makes us the children of the covenant, the B'nai Brit.

Call it a concern for reputation. We are embarrassed when any Jew is convicted of a crime or a Jewish politician gets in trouble. Call it a mother expecting a full report when you get home. Yeah, you earned a day's pay but did intentionally overcharge a customer or show too much aggression when cutting a deal? Would your mother be proud? Speaking of mothers, did you remember to say thank you? Yes, like the Hebrew National commercial, we are called to a higher standard. Do we double back when we forget to return the grocery cart to the cart station in the parking lot? We are alerted to situations, mostly small, and when we connect our thinking to action, we are able to step into the fullness of our Jewish destiny.

Don't confuse small with insignificant. There are people who say "Oh it won't make a difference." "I'm too busy to bother with this right now." "It doesn't matter, I'll let someone else pick up after me; that's what service employees get paid for; it is somebody else's job, not mine." And the question you need to ask yourself is: "Can you do your best right now where you are even though you feel at first that you are doing something that is beneath you?" You go through the world rushing about, driving here, grabbing something to go, getting yourself through each day with this nervous survival energy and every so often, you allow your mind to be attentive to the others moving through their day, worries preying on their minds, the obstacles that prevent them from getting through their day. The Torah tells us that even when we see our enemy struggling with righting the burden of his donkey, we stop what we are doing so we can assist. Imagine! Doing it for someone you don't like! So much the more so you are sensitive to what God is asking you to do for a co-worker, a family member, a neighbor. You replace the initial instinct to take a pass and be the first to be true to the promise of the covenant.

My wife Beth published an article a few weeks ago in The Jerusalem Report where she cites the Torah's command that we should be aware of returning a lost item to its owner. Three times in four verses in Deuteronomy 21, the words "lo lehitallem," "You shall not hide yourself" are repeated. Our covenantal tug is not only about remembering the stranger but also being aware of your surroundings. Why is that lone sheep over there in the meadow? Who does that umbrella belong to? Is that door open? I better go see if it is locked. Beth compares it to the "broken windows" rule of police officers on foot patrol. When an officer puts on his or her badge and walks the neighborhood, he is more likely to see a broken window in a home and prevent worse vandalism. Our covenant tells us that we are always the person with the badge.

Our people have existed for 5,000 years because of this covenant. Many people say that the secret of survival is in our intelligence or in our semi-nomadic existence or because of anti-semitism. But the truth is there are peoples equal in intelligence all over the world. Nomadic peoples have disappeared from our world despite the cultures that have left behind. And what kind of sadistic, cruel God would keep a people alive just for the sake of being pursued and persecuted by their enemies? I believed that every Jew is hardwired for the covenantal tug I am talking about. And there are just enough of us to grab hold of that golden ring to keep this Jewish way of behaving and being to continue from one generation to the next. Who are you to make excuses to refuse the tug?

Here is how it works. Every act of obedience releases the fullness of God's power inside of you. Our esophagus is equipped with a sphincter at the top that is consciously aware of what comes through our mouth. It is a muscle that can turn to allow air to go through our wind pipe into our lungs; it also can

turn to prevent food from going down the windpipe and then switch to allow food to enter the esophagus into the stomach. Divine energy also enters our bodies when we become aware of a situation where we can assist. It is most likely that the inclination for evil, laziness, ignorance, or self-interest will act first to gobble up that energy and the sphincter will turn one way and not the other. But when we train ourselves in the small tests, returning the shopping cart, not nagging your spouse, or not criticizing your rabbi, we get better at allowing that small muscle to turn to the right so that the inclination for good is strengthened.

It is like the old Cherokee Indian who says to his grandson that a “terrible fight is going on inside of me. It is between two wolves. One is evil –he is anger, envy sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Who do you feed? We want to be kind to our spouses and some of us are just not practiced enough. A little disrespectful here, a little sarcasm there. It is like a diet. Well maybe just one more cookie. It doesn't matter. I'll shovel the snow on my neighbor's sidewalk. Why do I always have to take responsibility? When will it be someone else's turn? Why should I apologize, I apologized the last time. And I know there are those people who are tired of being nice and are waiting on God who doesn't come through. What do they say? “No good deed goes unpunished.” But the fact is that while you are waiting on God, God is waiting on you. That is the secret of the covenantal tug. We build up the positive energy inside of us and we become the agents of God's reach in this world. Every person, every broken window, every misappropriated article is put in our paths for a purpose. When you are well practiced in the small tests, you will be prepared for the larger tests of your life.

Many of you know that I work as a hospice chaplain and every day I meet incredible people who are going through the greatest test of their lives. I'm not talking about the dying who I believe are preparing themselves for an incredible journey. I am talking about the caregivers to the dying. I sit with them and wonder about how they, many of them older people, cope with 24 hour care including feeding and dressing and bathing, using physical strength to help their loved ones to the bathroom, changing diapers, waking up in the middle of the night, and staying awake when the other is awake. Part of the dying process is more and more sleep and to discover two or three hours for conversation or a time to say “I love you” and say what's important is worth staying awake for. It is incredibly stressful. But the ones who get through it, grieve and return to normal life, are almost always the ones who say religion is important to them. They know generosity; they know kindness; they know compassion because God's energy has been part of them for a life time.

Small tests are the stepping stones for the larger than life tests. And when the test comes your way, you feel that covenantal tug, you clear your head of excuses, you do it now, not later, and you do it fully. Partial obedience is not obedience. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you partially forgive. When you are asked to volunteer, it doesn't mean when you get to heaven. One of my favorite preachers is Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church in Houston. He has inspired others to build churches like his in different parts of the world. He tells a story about the time a minister from Africa came to meet with him about raising money for a new church in his home country. During the conversation, Joel got an impression that he was supposed to give this minister his tie. Joel thought about it. It was a new tie and his second

thought was to get him another tie from home. But the impression was that he not bring an old tie; God wanted him to give this tie. Really, God? Small tests often mean parting with something we like. So finally Joel gave him the tie. The minister was so happy. Joel was so depressed. A few months later, Joel received a picture in the mail of the ribbon cutting ceremony of the new church in Africa. In the picture, the grinning minister was wearing the tie Joel had given him! Joel explains that the tie went beyond being a favorite possession, it has morphed into a symbol of hope – that this minister could return and do what he set out to do—to build a sanctuary for God’s glory, to give faith to his nation. The small tests that come our way may impact others in ways we don’t know! I believe that we unknowingly perform the acts of angels when God reaches down and tugs at us through these small tests.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes about the God of “pathos.” God needs us. God is in search of man. On this Rosh Hashana, I ask you not to ignore the small tests of your life this year. Your yetzer hara, your evil inclination, will try every excuse in the book and you will strengthen that yetzer with the “I know” and “I’ll take care of it later.” Covenantal tugs need your immediate concern. Do it fully. Receive God’s positive energy. Be ready for that covenantal tug so that you may grow into the fullness of your Jewish identity. And remember to return the shopping cart to its proper home. My family wishes you a Shana Tova v’tikvatenu!