

Va Yay-tzay 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 11/21/15

It has been a week now, but the tragedy in France still weighs heavy on our hearts and minds. We wonder how, in a civilized world, people could be so heinously evil as to take innocent lives in this way. We struggle to understand how something like this could happen? What were these people, these murderers, thinking?

Well, I'm not sure. I'm not sure anyone is sure. But my guess is that those who carried out these evil attacks did not think that they were doing something evil. Of course it WAS evil, I just don't think they saw it that way. Not only do I think that they did not think it was evil, my guess is that they even saw it as altruistic. I think that they were convinced, likely by religious leaders, that what they were doing was showing a self-less devotion to a higher cause. It is, of course the ultimate act of SELFISHNESS to take another person's life, but in a warped way, I think they thought they were being selfless, and what's worse, serving Gd.

What I think happened is that so called religious leaders, (and I loathe that religion can be used in this way, but it can) co-opted and corrupted one of the most important, and indeed holy aspects of religious thought, and that is selflessness; the ability to take a step back from egocentricity and to be open to the service of Gd and others. And Judaism in fact teaches precisely that: That we learn more about Gd and Gd's world when we move beyond the "I" of egocentricity.

That's one of the messages of the portion we read this week. As you remember, Jacob is on the run, far from home. He lies down at night and falls asleep and has his famous dream: a ladder reaching to heaven with angels on it. And when Jacob awoke from his sleep he said the words we have written above our ark here today: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of Gd; this is the gate of heaven. Gd was in this place and I, I did not know it."

That last line is the key: "Gd was in this place and I, I did not know it." It is that second "I" that unfortunately gets lost in translation. In Hebrew you say "Lo Yadati" - "I did not know it," without having to add the extra "Anochi." In this sentence, the second "I" is superfluous. To translate it literally we would have to say, "And I, I did not know it."

So why the double "I"? Well, I read a fascinating answer from a great Hasidic work called the Panim Yafot: He wrote, "How do we know that "Gd is in this place?" By "V'anochi lo yadati" - by NOT knowing the "I". We know Gd when we forget the Self. We sense the Divine when we move beyond the "I" of egocentricity, when we stop focusing predominantly on ourselves. That's when we can truly become open to Gd and to Gd's world around us.

It is precisely this kind of sacred teaching that is being so grossly distorted by those who give up their own lives while taking the lives of innocents. Judaism teaches that we give up some of our own lives TO ENHANCE THE LIVES OF OTHERS. We do indeed want to feel closer to Gd, but our Gd is as Jacob said, right here and right now, even if we do not always sense Gd. In order to do so we give up some of our own ego, our own self-serving interest, our own "me-me-me" so that we can realize that Gd is in this place all the time and we don't even know it.

It is so sad and so painful for me to see such a meaningful spiritual concept as selflessness, the diminishing of the all-powerful "I", distorted, corrupted and abused in this way. But as I have said, rather than lament what religion can do in the hands of some people, we need to double down and celebrate what it can do in the hearts of good people, who far, far, far outnumber those who are truly bent on using religion, faith, and Gd to kill.

Very soon most of us will be sitting down to Thanksgiving meals with family and friends. And if we are to be truly thankful of the presence of others in our lives, we have to make room for them in our hearts. And if our hearts are only about the "I", the "Me", then we will not have enough bandwidth for appreciating the others we are with. It takes humility to truly give thanks. It takes a bit of selflessness - not total selflessness, you have to have a degree of pride in who you are, what you stand for and what you have accomplished. But it takes a degree of selflessness to understand that when good friends and family open their hearts lovingly and patiently to one another then truly Gd IS in that place, and this time, maybe we'll really know it.