

When Loss Renews Itself as Hope

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5782

Rabbi David Kosak

Pastor Grant. Reb Zelig. Juliette Heitner. Three people and a Chasidic story. An Evangelical pastor I met through my work at the Common Table, a Charedi rabbi in Northern California. And Juliette, who recently marked her bat mitzvah right here at Neveh Shalom. These three individuals shouldn't share much in common, and yet they do. These are strange times we find ourselves in.

Let me explain.

The pastor is not one of those Old-Time religion people. He's not all about fire and brimstone or a religion of guilt, but he's told me about some of his colleagues who are and who believe that we are in the End Days. The Rapture is coming, and Jesus will take up those who believe in him, leaving the rest of us to perish.

My Charedi friend, meanwhile, phrases it differently, telling me that we are in *chevlei moshiach*, the birth pangs of the Messiah. According to one of our traditional commentators, this is a 70 year period of upheaval and turmoil, which sets the stage for the messiah's arrival.

And our bat mitzvah girl, Juliette, recently taught our community that within 60 years, our farms will be gone. She has created a blog to encourage people to make positive change and to work toward soil renewal.

Three very different individuals. Three very dissimilar world views. And still, what a curious overlap of beliefs they share. Things are as bad as they can be. If you listen carefully to each of these stories, you can hear this worry that it's the end of history.

Yet contained within each of these three stories of apocalypse, there's a glimmer of hope. Doom and gloom, followed by the possibility of renewal.

Our age is consumed by apocalyptic thinking and dystopian futures. It's in our movies, our books, and our religions. I can't say with certainty why that is, but it reminds me of Bruno Bettelheim's work, "The Uses of Enchantment," in which he explored "The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales.' For Bettelheim, the dark underbelly of traditional fairy tales, which were far scarier than the sanitized American versions, helped children overcome existential dread by exposing them to their worst fears.

Myth is not just for children; it is also the powerful way that we adults tell ourselves fairy tales that explain the world of loss in which we find ourselves. So let's be frank—this is a time of loss. It extends far beyond the pandemic we are all so tired of talking about. As we begin a new year, how do we get back to the hope which our evangelical pastor, ultra-orthodox rabbi and bat mizvah girl each hold up to us? How do we make sure this will be a sweet year?

We need a myth for our time that will allow *us* to overcome our existential worries. We need a fairy tale of believable hope. With that in mind, I'd like to revisit the founding mythology of the Chasidic movement. Some of you may recognize it. Enjoy the ride.

This is the Story about the Place. It began at the beginning of the 18th century, when the Chasidic movement had just been founded by the Master of the Good Name, the beloved, humble, and charismatic Ba'al Shem Tov. Danger confronted his community and they had exhausted their normal channels. Left in the lurch, the Baal Shem Tov traveled deep within the Carpathian forest to a particularly powerful spot. There he lit a mystical fire and invoked a rare and powerful Kabbalistic incantation. In that place of power and mystery, he prayed with such power and purity of heart that the danger passed and all was well.

More time passed. Years. The Ba'al Shem Tov passed from the world and a new danger arose. He had been succeeded by the second generation Chasidic master, Reb Dov Ber of Mezritch. His community had also exhausted their options as their generation's danger grew. To avert the tragedy, the Maggid of Mezritch traveled to the same spot where his Rebbe, the Ba'al Shem Tov had prayed. But in our world, not everything of value gets transmitted, and not everything that is passed from hand to hand is remembered. For the life of him, the Maggid was unsure how to prepare the very powerful and mystical fire. What he did remember, though, were the words of the Kabbalistic prayer. And so the Rebbe of Mezritch said, "Hashem, I remember the place and the prayer, but not the fire. Please accept the place and the

prayer and help.” This prayer also was heard, and soon enough, the danger passed and all was well.

Time marches on and none of us can stop it. The leader of the third generation of Chassidim was the holy Reb Moshe Leib of Sassov. He also was called upon to save his community from danger. It was autumn, and a cold wind had already arrived. Wrapping his cloak tightly around his shoulders, the saintly Reb Moshe Leib made the long journey until he also arrived at the powerful spot in the forest which he knew had been used previously, by his Rebbe and his Rebbe’s Rebbe. But when he arrived, he found his cheeks were full of tears as he turned skyward and declared, “Hashem, the fire we had already forgotten in my my Rebbe’s times. And, now, what can I say? The Kabbalistic prayer escapes me and I simply don’t remember. But, Hashem, here I am, at the place where the Baal Shem Tov prayed. This I remember. Please, God, let the merit of the place save my community and my family, and maybe even me.” It was enough, and the worst of the danger was averted.

We all know that a good fairy tale works by drawing on elemental patterns. So when the fourth generation chassidic rabbi, the Rizhiner, took the reins of leadership, we are already prepared as listeners. The plague arrived at the doors of his community and so much time had elapsed, that he had forgotten the prayer. The makings of the fire were lost in the mists of memory. And roads and forests, well they also change. The land itself moves, such that even the place where his ancestors had traveled to avert catastrophe?!—it too was forgotten.

All that was left for the Holy Rizhiner was to open his heart to God. “Hashem, he cried out, “all that is left is this story. Let it suffice.” And it did. The danger passed, and just this past Thursday, on the grounds of the Portland Chabad school, some of us marked the bar mitzvah of Yossi Wilhem. The Chassidic world of today is deeply changed from the heady early days of constant spiritual invention, but it remains.

Why is this tale such a foundational myth of the chasidic world? As a new Jewish movement, it was not at all clear if this new approach to Judaism would have the legs to survive. Each generation saw itself imperiled.

The myth acknowledges our feelings of loss and inadequacy. It reminds us that danger is real. For those reasons, it is believable. But that is not where the myth ends, for it also lets us know that we are enough, as a generation, a community, and as individuals. Right now. As we are.

With two caveats.

We have to be willing to accept our losses. We have to acknowledge our ordeals. We have to take stock of all that is gone and acknowledge our responsibility in that.

Once we have done so, we must also have the courage to tell our story of renewal. We have to believe it is enough, for when we do, our souls regain their trust that we are all children of God.

I want every one of us to have a joyous, beautiful, hopeful year. I want to bless every one here on the plaza or watching at home with a real sense of contentment and equanimity.

Here's the catch. A blessing needs to be reciprocated to function. We need to accept the blessing for it to operate on us.

So my challenge to you this year is to tell your own story of renewal. Start off telling the story every day. No less than once a week. Maybe make it part of your Shabbat table. As you do so, the story will begin to change and take on a life of its own. Some parts will be lost, but that's to be expected. Everything changes and that is as it should be. Over the course of the year, you will suddenly realize that a story is not a story, it's not just words. A good story, an enduring myth is itself a mystical prayer. For as you tell your story of renewal, you will also be renewed. You will become the story. So tell it well. Tell it with hope.

Barukh she'amar. Speak it into existence.

Make it a good year.