

PSALM 42

“As the hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee O God.

[...] My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’

[...] Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

The unaffected beauty of these lines lies not only in their content - the return of faith and hope after despair - but in the intimate style which is typical of the “Elohist” author, speaking to Elohim as to an absent sense of quite a practical Being who soothes and comforts and strengthens. To me as an existentialist what has happened to the Elohist is that he has been thrown down, he is fallen, what was ready-to-hand in his life’s work is present somewhere but of reach for the moment. Nothingness, Ayn Sof is invading the integrity of his self.

This psalm which the Elohist or someone using his style probably edited in the Babylonian exile period or later seems to know Being as a something to be loved as the female aspect of God, the Shekhina, or as the Kabbalistic Binah, “female” Understanding, the recipient of “male” wisdom and of “male” and “female” Da-at, scientific knowledge: in this case knowledge of the unconscious which contains the repression causing this spiritual/neurotic illness. The Elohist style is different from the Jahvist’s tones echoing YHVH Himself who is the LORD of power, war and retribution, Adonai.

There is another special meaning touched upon in other lines in the psalm: the justified anger of the author: “As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say continually, ‘Where is your God?’ ” What a brilliant simile: the absent God extracted from the body leaving a wound which will kill the Elohist. In clinical depression the body-image can be felt neurotically to have holes in it because it is not filled with Being-in-the-body-as-an-organic-whole

The Elohist was a supporter of Elohim: “[...] how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.” No wonder he feels betrayed. Still, the Elohist tries to enter into dialogue with Elohim acknowledging the power of Being in the form of the endless energy of nature: “Deep calls to deep at the thunder of thy cataracts; all thy waves and thy billows have gone over me.” Elohim, however powerful, is out of reach. There is a loss of a sense of meaningful Being. This is not the fault of the Elohist but the “blame” is denied and attributed to a spiritual / emotional drought and the enmity of his adversaries. A certain pattern emerges which was researched by the Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler- Ross – commonly found in situations of loss. Her book *“On Death and Dying”* has brought greater gentleness and understanding to this most important and often neglected field of medical and social care.

Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are in the subtext of dying and of spiritual alienation in this psalm. It is as if the writer is dying of a spiritual thirst the source of which is located in the inherent dryness one feels when one has lost the sustenance of a previously plentiful love. Loss is part of life – yet one denies it – so painful is it to acknowledge that love-loss-abandonment are inherent in mortal Being: so one composes an art-object, a hymn of praise to the very Being one

has lost so as to re-capture it imaginatively. Being was originally present in the Imaginary - perhaps one's mirrored good self-image as a small child in the arms of a mother, father or other loved one - an image which one imagines will be reflected back and forth forever.

Perhaps when we are bereft - we deny that we are ill, ageing rapidly, have made a terrible mistake - and we blame Elohim for denying us His or Her (the Shekhina's) "liquid" sustenance, symbolized by thirst. But all we need to do is to accept that we with our limitations are in a state of thirstiness, drought, deprivation, sickness, loss, fatality, not to deny it. Perhaps if we accept our facticity and our being tied to Fate we shall be allowed to drink again the spiritual richness of Elohim and Shekhina. Being or God is surely there all the time. That is exactly what the psalmist asserts.[...] "...therefore I remember thee..." We need to remember when we were surrounded by a mother's or a father's or a child's or a friend's love, not accept that our devastation and grief stops us remembering. We are not fated forever.

We are angry that we were so loyal to Elohim and His Shekhina – she who is an immanent Being-In-The-World - "how [I] led them in procession to the house of God" – but now (S)He leaves us thirsty, deprived of His / Her love.

I may even bargain with Elohim/Shekhina. I may say I will acknowledge Your power over nature and the endlessness of Her/His love if only You will show me your actual face– or at least some sign of your manifestation.

If all else fails, I can always say: "there is nothing for it: I am depressed, abandoned, mourning because of the oppression of my enemy."

Finally however there is acceptance: " Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

Rabbi Moshe De Leon the 13th century Sephardi Kabbalist, author of The Zohar suggested that the face of God is revealed in B'Tselem – in the image of God. However surely this is a potential – the Zohar errs on the side of a constantly and repeated ecstasy through a mystical Midrashic discourse on the Torah of its protagonists Shimon bar Yochai and his chaverim who create a total world-view based on the sefirot. But, more realistically, the sefirot are not in all actual human beings but in (Platonic) ideals reiterated in Philo Judaeus' logos. The mystical chaverim are a small Kabbalistic sect not a world movement although allied to other mysticisms like Hindu yoga, Sufism, and of course Isaac Luria's full-blown restorative, redemptive Tikkun Kabbalah of 16th century Tsvat (Safed).

The sefirot are in those who strive consciously to express the emanations of the sacred myth of God in the particular form of the ideal Adam Kadmon and the ideal Chava Kadmona. In visualising B'Tselem one emerges from denial, anger, bargaining, depression and achieves at least self-acceptance and one might move on to Tikkun, the restoration of the upper world (the Platonic world of ideal forms) through mitzvot. This, to the existentialist, happens not in Heaven but in an ego-ideal enlarging and ethically enriching the person and his significant others.