

MYTHIC PASSAGES  
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***Celebrate the Journey***

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The *Torah*, the first five books of Moses, is read each week in synagogues around the world on the Sabbath in an annual cycle that begins and ends with the holiday of Simchat *Torah*, the Rejoicing of *Torah*. In contrast to the more solemn and introspective holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur that begin the month-long series of Jewish High Holy Days, Simchat *Torah* is a day of pure joy, revelry and celebration. As this holiday is quickly approaching (October 25), we have just completed one of the final weekly portions, entitled Netzavim, or Standing. This portion takes place on the last day of Moses' life. He has spent five weeks recounting to the people their history and their moral and spiritual obligations. At the end of that very long and detailed discourse, with the entire people gathered before him, on the last day of his 120 year life, with one of his final breaths, he tells the people "It [the *Torah*] is not in Heaven" (Deuteronomy 30:12). The Bible is not in Heaven. It seems a very odd and cryptic statement. What could it mean?

There is a tremendous story from the *Talmud*, the Jewish oral tradition of laws and stories, that tells of an argument that took place in the Academy of Yavneh in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Achnai the oven maker brought a newly invented oven before the assembly of Rabbis at the Academy. The elder statesman of the academy, Rabbi Eliezar, deemed the oven pure. His colleagues on the other hand, dissented with his opinion and overruled him. Rabbi Eliezer offered countless detailed and well-substantiated proofs of his opinion, but the other Rabbis rejected them all in turn.

Finally, in frustration, Rabbi Eliezer produced a miracle to prove his point. He declared, "Let the carob tree prove it," and with that, the earth rumbled and shuddered, and the carob tree in the yard exploded into the air like a rocket.

"The carob tree cannot prove it," retorted the assembly of Rabbis.

Frustrated still and now angry, Rabbi Eliezer bellowed, "If I am right, let the river prove it!" With that, the river began to flow backwards!

Undeterred, his colleagues merely replied, "The river cannot prove it."

Totally enraged, Rabbi Eliezer shouted to the walls of the Academy, commanding them to fall in on the gathered assembly of Rabbis. At this, Rabbi Joshua stood up and declared to the walls, "When Rabbis are in debate, what right do you have to interfere?" And out of deference to both, the walls leaned in a bit, but did not collapse.

Now, completely frustrated and exhausted, Rabbi Eliezer finally cried out to God and said, "If I am right, let it be proved by Heaven!" At that point there was a thunderous rumble and a heavenly voice boomed, "Why do you dispute Rabbi Eliezer? With this, as with all things, Rabbi Eliezer is right."

Rabbi Joshua stood and said, "It [the *Torah*] is not in Heaven!"

Rabbi Yerimiah explained, "The *Torah* was already given on Mt. Sinai. Therefore we pay no attention to a Heavenly voice."

Purportedly, at this point God laughed with joy, exclaiming, "My children have defeated Me! My children have defeated Me!"

"It is not in Heaven." These are profound words spoken on the last day of Moses' life. The stories, the myths, are not in Heaven, they are here on Earth. As Joseph Campbell so eloquently conveyed in his work and life, you must go beyond the literacy of the stories and find the song in them. Make them sing. These are not stories about events that occurred in ancient times, these are stories that are happening every day to each one of us. When we relegate the stories to history, we imprison them in the past, and we lose their song.

There are no easy answers to life. No easy ways out that you can buy on an infomercial or take in a pill. The stories are not concrete dictates sent to us from Heaven in final form, simple solutions to life's complexities, injustices, and paradoxes. They are here for us to struggle with, embrace, and make our own. The journey is a difficult one, but the rewards are great.

There is a story that says that God confided in the angels his plans to create humans in the Divine image. The angels were angry and afraid. They said, "If creatures as evil and as selfish as humans are created in the Divine image then they will think like God thinks, create like God creates, feel what God feels, grasp eternity and live forever. We cannot let this happen!"

They decided to steal the Divine Image and hide it where humans would never find it. But where? One angel suggested they hide it atop the highest mountain, but then another said, "One day they will climb to the tops of the highest mountains, and they will find it."

Another angel offered, "Let's hide it at the bottom of the deepest sea!" But they objected saying, "Humans will explore the depths of the sea, and one day they will find it."

Each angel had a suggestion that in turn was rejected by the rest until the smartest most creative angel finally offered a solution. "Let's hide it where they will never look for it. Let's hide it within their own hearts and souls. They will never go look for it there." To that all of the angels were in agreement, and they hid the Divine image within the heart and soul of each man and woman, and that is where it is hidden to this day.

Within each of us, there is holiness, a calling, an authentic purpose. As the angels correctly surmised, most of us do not want to go looking for our Divine image in our heart or in our soul. It is dangerous, painful, and difficult. You must face your own demons instead of projecting them on to others. You must risk being different than the pack. You must risk being wrong. The angels were very wise, for we have climbed the highest mountains and plumbed the depths of the sea, but most of us are afraid to explore the terrain of our own hearts.

Viewed metaphorically, myths and stories are road maps to exploring the paths of life. Every hero goes into the abyss. Every heroine faces threshold guardians. We can use these stories as sustenance and guides in our own quests to discover our Divine image.

In the final chapter of the *Torah*, Moses dies. He is on the border of the holy land, but he will never make it in. He knows this grim fact before he dies; his life-long struggle to reach the Promised Land will end with him just short of that goal. He can see the land flowing with milk and honey, but he cannot have it. Yet, as this final chapter is completed in synagogues, and the scrolls of the *Torah* are rolled all the way back to the beginning to begin anew with Genesis, we are told to sing, and dance, and celebrate wildly. The whole holiday is a celebration of the *Torah*, of the journey, not the destination. Moses never reached his destination, and we dance and revel just the same. It was on the journey that he attained enlightenment. May you dance, sing, and celebrate along your journey to discover the Divine within you.

See you in June.