

Transgressions

As a child the single greatest blow to my developing spirituality was the guilt from *pegam habit*.
That masturbatory fantasy life that allowed a few minutes of escape from the intolerable world of a British post war childhood and its violence has become ingrained. But at what a price!
The days following I could not pray to the Almighty One above.
The guilt was palpable and my self-loathing a persistent sense of self.

The mother that whacked me for not practicing piano sufficiently or diligently with her bamboo canes waiting for service in the flower pot ever ready for immediate use,
forcing me to devise ruses for so-called practice tinkering with the keys that almost sounded like music and scales yet allowed me to daydream the hour away all the while fool the authority of the raging mother not always successfully.

Even before my sense of spiritual self was layered and self-conscious
a recurring and familiar feeling of inner dread overtook me.
This second being, rotten to the core, was born from these violent encounters, leaving me with an indescribable sense of inner desolation already by age 10.

Over the years this sense of the transgressive and the inability to escape the guilt of existence has permeated my inner landscape helped in large measure by the rabbinic tradition of the divine judge on the annual day of judgement-Rosh Hashanah-where all pass before the heavenly tribunal-the Grand Inquisitor and where all one's prior actions of the year are measured.
And the supplicatory prayers (*tachanun*) that invoked divine mercy for sins each monday and thursday, then the *selichot*, and fast days' penitent *tefillot*.

That Ancient One of the Old Testament had conspired with the inner *kritik* to form an overwhelming alliance from without and within and leaving me devastated
continuously found wanting and feeling the "guilty" verdict even before the crime.

When the outer world conspired as well in the form of the DEA and the State of Massachusetts the wound left an indelible mark of Cain in my soul.
No longer could I trust the self within as a moral compass
no longer could I see myself as "innocent".
Kafka came alive for me as I seemed to live out his parables

in real life. The second being was now the only voice.

Yet over the years I have found
a developing sense of inner peace
that came with acceptance of the darker soul
and the realization that the "I" that was me
was a composite of drives and ethnic codes
formed in a genetic prison not of my own making.
In this biological system insults and traumas affected neuronal circuits
and laid down indelible pathways of aberrant behaviors,
making the sense of "free-will" philosophically problematic yet allowing some measure
of relief in the neurological world of cause and effect.

Ironically in the very transgression of this or that
I would sense the outer limits of my self
the borders of my inner territory
and the edges of what otherwise was unknown aspects of my moral code.
I would learn what I would be willing to do
and what I would be unwilling to engage in
which taught me much more about the inner world I inhabited
than any text or teacher.

Often my father would spring to mind in such conflicts
both as a guide and as an example
in re-remembering what he had endured
in similar circumstances.
Indelibly etched in my soul was the anxiety written on his face as he returned home
after being questioned by the purchase tax inspectors circa 1960
which must have evoked memories of black Maria cars in Vienna whisking away
Jews in the night. His mother sent him cycling daily and upon his return
he never knew whether they might be there or not.
For in his choice to escape the horror on that fateful day in the Viennese banhof
on the platform-
he also had to betray those closest to him
in leaving them (albeit beyond his control) for safety...
Thus my very physical being is the result of this
conflicted choice of his, to betray in order to live.

Yet it was in my reading of tradition above all, that differences between us-
father and son- would explode onto the Shabbat table passionately
focused on our differing reading of sacred texts
and his insistence on literal readings of midrashic myth,
(ironically at the same time his accepting a purely allegorical reading of Greek
mythology.)
His critical voice ringing in my ears when I begged to differ
holding me to his pre-war literary conventions,

all the while forcing my inner conviction to pass muster
and honing my rhetoric in treading my own path of reading.

The price for all of this has been steep
for I find no solace in the company of co-religionists,
having been branded an *apikoros* of sorts
which I have been slow to embrace.
Our post war community was small,
and following the Holocaust there was no room
for dissent. We were in theological "lock down" mode
like those facing the tornado in the Wizard of Oz.
All the shutters to the outside had been closed
all the liberal hatches have been pulled down tight
there being no room for dissent or resistance to authoritarian traditional readings.

Yet it was precisely the Shoah
and the theological consequences thereof
which have haunted my spiritual life
and held all my textual readings up to its lens.

This indelible fact of history, begging the very covenantal relationship
and the accident of my birth so soon after,
as well as the very incarnation of my father's impossible choice,
have forced me to re-examine and constantly
refuse myself the luxury of pious readings, literal Protestant readings
and self-serving orthodoxies.

To be sure the self-sabotaging self
has been well at work, the darker second me, all the while
doing its best to sabotage and leaving its physiological trail
of deep stomach pains and the familiar dread in the chest.
Never to forget that fainting spell
before the Harvard Professor as the junior faculty
instructor I was, being told the DEA had paid him a visit,
after two years of sacrifice for him and academic medical research.

Awaking to the reality of being examined and investigated
an 8 week trial of the very self and character
just like the 11 year old naughty boy
in the primary school,
being repeatedly whipped by my headmaster-Mr Shapiro
for being sent out of class
for not knowing the equations or for being too dark skinned for a British schoolboy.
And the Maths Master in grammar school
who felt my only use in his class was not for my mathematical prowess
rather my anatomical susceptibility for fondling

with his thundering Germanic accent to prevent any protest.
Only here I had to learn to own my mistakes and flaws
openly paraded in the court room drama.

Aging has removed the sense of victimhood
that haunted me for years
now that I have made peace with parents, teachers and professors,
but the ultimate authority remains transcendent in power and opaque to access.
For Him alone and His Law
transgression has become a *raison d'être*
of a kind,
for only a transgressive reading of the self and of received texts
even of his Halacha,
will do in this post-Holocaust world
where all traditions must fail
or else we will fail those who died for tradition so unwillingly.

In the wilderness that is left after all certainty has perished
in the killing fields
we walk about numb and alone.
In the screaming silence of His absence
we refuse dialogue
despite a deep yearning to be heard by Him.