

Yom Kippur Morning Sermon 5784 – Rabbi Linda Joseph

ULTIMATE AWE

Our sense of Jewish time is linear. It begins with Creation. It ends with the End of Days. Our tradition contains various imaginings and stories as to what the End of Days might look like. What all these stories have in common, is that the End of Days, will be one of Ultimate Awe. Here is one such story about the End of Days.

I learned this story from Howard Schwartz. It is a story from the thirteenth century, in Spain.¹ As Jewish storytelling often does, it uses metaphor to describe what the Ultimate Awe might be. Here is the traditional story.

Once upon a time, there was a Princess who lived in the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem. She was not a princess like any other, for she was a princess made entirely of light. Her father, the King, was the ruler of the world.

He lived in – if you can imagine it -- a more magnificent Palace in the heavens. The Palace in the heaven had two thrones: A Throne of Justice and a Throne of Mercy. When the King sat on the Throne of Justice, he was stern and judgmental. When the King sat on the Throne of Mercy, he was full of compassion and forgiveness.

So why did the King and the Princess live separately? The King had sent the Princess into the world to give out blessings to the people who came to the Temple. Since the Princess was made of light, most of the time she was invisible when they visited her Palace. Though the people could sense her presence amongst them.

Occasionally, they saw the Princess of Light in their dreams and visions. In those dreams, she would sometimes appear as a Princess, sometimes as a bride, and sometimes she was just barely detectable, a Divine Presence that could be seen hovering over the Temple where she lived.

The people would say to each other – “Wow! Look! There’s the Princess! That is the Princess!” Whenever they saw her, however they saw her, their hearts would offer a prayer. For they knew, if the Princess was with them dwelt amongst them, her father, the King, was present, protecting them as well.

While the Temple stood in Jerusalem, whilst the Princess had her home, she was happy, and her days were filled with blessings and providing blessings. But the day came, when the Temple was torn down, and the Princess's heart broke. She witnessed the Jewish people whom she so loved being forced to leave their homes. They were being exiled.

What was she to do? Where was she to go? To her Father's Palace? She decided to leave her home too and go into exile with the people she loved.

When the Princess's father, the King, learned that his daughter had gone into exile, he missed her deeply. He guessed where she was but was still unable to find her exact whereabouts. He called for all the princes of the world to go and find her.

The King challenged them: "If you find the Princess, my daughter, I will allow you to marry her. And on the day of your wedding, the whole world will celebrate! But do not think it will be easy to find my daughter. She is well hidden, but at the same time, she is always with the Jewish people."

Now, if you were a Prince, wouldn't you want to marry a Princess, whose father is the Ruler of the World? One by one, each brave Prince set out on a quest to find the Princess of Light, searching for her everywhere. They looked at each continent and island. They searched every town and village. Examined every field and forest. They entered the rooms of every house and investigated each nook and cranny.

But wherever they looked the Princess of Light was not to be found.

At last, there was only one Prince left who had not searched for the Princess of Light. Now it was his turn. How could he turn down such a great quest? But all the Princes before him had not succeeded. What had they missed?

Before he set out into the world, this Prince sat down in his chamber and said to himself: "Where is it that a Princess can be so well hidden, yet at the same time always be with the Jewish people?"

The Prince decided to seek out a wise Rabbi. After all, the King had said the Princess of Light was with the Jewish people in exile. Perhaps the Rabbi would know the answer.

The Rabbi said: "There is only one thing in the world that is always with the Jewish people – and that is the Torah."

Thus, the Prince made a request: "Can you teach me Torah?" And the Rabbi agreed to teach him.

Now the Prince had to study the Torah for many, many years before he could master it. The day finally arrived that he had become such a Master of Torah, that he was able to find out where the Princess was hidden...

Where had the Princess of Light hidden herself? In the very words of the Torah. As he read the words of the Torah and understood the secrets hidden there, the wise Prince glimpsed the light of the princess, and his eyes began to fill with splendor.

Now that the Prince knew where the Princess was hidden, he was determined to set her free. And when he does, her father, the King, has promised to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, that was once her home. And on the day of their wedding, the whole world will come out and celebrate.

When I read this story I loved it's beginning.... But I had theological problems with its end.

I do not envision Ultimate Awe as the rebuilding of the Temple.

I do not believe that the Princess of Light, the Shechina, will one day be limited to her former abode.

Jewish understandings and sensibilities change with time.

I loved the beginning of this story from the thirteenth century. But I determined it needed a new end that worked for me, a *Tikkun*, a repair. A more contemporary understanding of Ultimate Awe.

So here is how I imagine the end of the story:

The Princess of Light had gone into exile with the Jewish people and was hidden.

The last Prince approached the Rabbi who told him that the only thing that in the world that is always with the Jewish people is Torah.

The Prince requested to learn Torah.

Now the Prince had to study the Torah for many, many years before he could master it.

The day finally arrived that he had become such a Master of Torah, that he was able to find out where the Princess was hidden... Where had the Princess of Light hidden herself? In the very words of the Torah.

As he read the words of the Torah, and began to understand the secrets hidden there, the wise Prince glimpsed the light of the princess, and his eyes began to fill with splendor. That splendor was blinding.

But the Prince determined his eyes should become more used to the light. The Prince continued to read the words seeking clarity. He so hoped to glimpse the Princess of Light just once again.

The more he gazed. The more he wondered: “Why was he unable to *always* see the Princess of Light in the words of Torah?”

Then the Prince stood back and stared at the whole. He looked at the patterns of letters and words. It was then he determined something new. A clue! Inside the Torah, the Princess had built a magnificent palace for herself.

In it the Princess had found her own joy and happiness. Her days were filled with blessings and providing blessings. Each time a Jew read Torah she would bestow upon them a blessing.

Sometimes the people could feel the Princess’s presence hovering over the Torah. Occasionally, they saw the Princess of Light in their dreams and visions, like in days of old.

The Prince stepped further back and stared at the whole. The light was still dazzling, but with time he saw more and more. The Prince looked at the spaces. There he saw that the Princess of Light had begun a new project.

He caught glimpses of her work.

Through the extraordinary light of Torah, the Prince saw deeper than he had ever seen. The Princess of Light was not invisible but was more perceptible.

What did the Prince see? Each time a Jew taught Torah; the Princess laid a paver of light. She was creating a path made of the stuff of her soul. And the path - it clearly headed in the direction of the Heavens. Where her father, the King, lived in his magnificent palace. It was clear. This path would lead the Princess’s Divine Presence back to the King’s Divine Presence. This was the path to unite the earth and the heavens once again.

If it was built, the Jews could sense the King’s protection once more. What a magnificent project the Princess was undertaking.

Now the Prince knew not only where the Princess was hidden.

He knew what she was doing.

The Prince, determined to join the Princess in building that path, to become her partner. in forging a path that lead from earth to heaven. So, the Prince became a teacher of Torah. The Prince became a co- creator of those pavers of light that would one day reach the King's palace.

In doing so, he grasped hope. Maybe one day he would be wise and worthy enough that the Princess of Light would fall in love with him. Maybe one day, the Princess of Light would welcome him to dwell with her in the Palace she had built. Maybe one day they could give out blessings together. Maybe one day they might be married and the whole world would come out to celebrate.

Then, *bayom ha-hu*, on that day...

The King would visit from the Heavens and the whole world would be filled with glory. How Awe Filled if that came to be.

That would be their happily ever after.

ⁱ Text based primarily on "The Princess of Light" in Howard Schwartz *Next Year in Jerusalem: 3000 Years of Jewish Stories*, New York: Viking Penguin, 1996