



Let's Give 'em Something to Think About

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The novelist and literary critic Cynthia Ozick once wrote:

Especially in Diaspora we cannot be Jewish just by being; and that is the exhaustion and the difficulty. If we lapse even for a moment into "just being," then we have lapsed into ... triviality. So to remain Jewish is a process—something which is an ongoing and muscular thing, a progress or, sometimes, a regression, a constant self-reminding, a caravan of watchfulness always on the move; above all an unsparing consciousness.

Commenting on Jewish history, Ms. Ozick writes: "For the one certainty we can count on the world for is that it will interrupt us. The history of the Jews has always been a *history of interruptions*" Whatever may happen, we will move beyond it. "So we must resume," she continues, "and it is the resumption that is the audacious thing," fitting commentary to the insubstantiality of all that our people have experienced.

The oldest interruptions were those stylized eruptions of the Divine we read in the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Bible. They bestow gifts of astonishment but also demands for accountability for our actions – like that throwaway line in Leviticus about being as concerned about your neighbor as you are about yourself. [Memory jog: Read Leviticus 19:17-18.] They were sufficient as spectacle and as personal measure, as the biblical scholar Dr. Richard Elliott Friedman has noted, to generate a religion. Recounting the narrative in the first books of the Hebrew Bible, Dr. Friedman says:

In the first books of the Bible, Genesis and Exodus especially, there are splitting seas and talking snakes, and the generation in the wilderness sees twenty-four- hours-a-day, every day of the week, a miracle in front of them. A column of cloud turns to a column of fire by night. God speaks to them from over the mountain. They get thirsty and water comes from rocks. The water is bitter and God makes it sweet. There's manna every morning for breakfast. It is not a world where you picture one Israelite turning to another and saying, "Do you believe in God?" [God] is a visible reality to them. But among God's last words to Moses are: "I will surely hide my face from them. I will see what their end will be." And that starts to happen and the miracles gradually diminish, as do the appearances of angels. The last person in the Bible to whom it is said "And the Lord appeared unto" is Solomon, but there are still 500 years of the Bible left in the story there. ... [In] the later books like, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, there are no miracles, there are no talking animals, there are no angels. There isn't even mention of the words, "The Lord said unto."

The post-biblical era conditionally ended our dependence on disruptions of nature as the definition of our faith and shifted our attention to another side of Jewish life, something that Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks z'l called our people's "chronological imagination"— to conceive of millennia during which we have cultivated projects advancing human freedom, creativity, and compassion. Despite tragic lapses, we have persisted in urging people to exercise greater responsibility for their enormous ability to improve life.

We should take a moment now to reflect on the work of the fall Holy Days – when that call for divine patience and re-commitment filled us with hundreds of thousands of words, prayers, and reminders that God did not create us to be junk, and that in returning to the annual cycle of reading of our texts we are returning to contemplation of the role assigned by God: to be responsible creators with the materials of the universe and to be stewards of the one life and one world we are charged to treat with respect and humility. And that is where our story begins again in Genesis....

"One ought every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and, if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words."

—Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe