Rabbi Tanhuma Facilitates a Dialogue of Compassion
Between Heaven and Earth

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On the fast of Yom Kippur the portion of the prophets that is read is Isaiah's severe condemnation of fasting as a ritual act when accompanied by quarrelling and false accusations rather than generosity of heart and of material aid to the needy. By reading this prophetic poetry carefully you can decipher the message written in rabbinic prose in the famous story about Rabbi Tanhuma, the drought, and the scandal that about the divorcés that upset the whole community.

Isaiah's Sermon

The people: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

The prophet replies: Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. (Isaiah 58)

The Tale of Rabbi Tanhuma

In the days of Rabbi Tanhuma [whose name means Rabbi Compassion] [the people] Israel needed a fast, so they went to him [Rabbi Tanhuma] and said: 'Master [Rabbi], proclaim a fast.' He proclaimed a fast, for one day, then a second day, and then a third, yet no rain fell.

Thereupon he [Rabbi Tanhuma] entered [the assembly] and preached to them, saying: 'My sons! Be filled with compassion for each other, and then the Holy One, blessed be God, will be filled with compassion for you.'

Now while they were distributing tzedakah [philanthropy] to their poor, they saw some man named so-and-so give coins to his divorced wife. Then they went to him [Rabbi Tanhuma] and exclaimed: 'Master, why are doing sitting here [distributing tzedakah], when such [mis]deeds are being perpetrated here!

He [Rabbi Tanhuma] said: 'What did you see?'

They told him: We saw some man named so-and-so give his divorced wife coins!'
He summoned them [literally, sent after them and brought them] into the public assembly. He [Rabbi Tanhuma] interrogated him: 'Who is she for you?' He replied: 'She is my divorced wife.' He [Rabbi Tanhuma] asked: 'So why did you give her coins?'
He replied: 'Because I saw her in distress, and I was filled with compassion for her.'

At that moment Rabbi Tanhuma raised his face upward and exclaimed: 'Master [Rabban] of all the worlds! If this one who has no obligation to give that one alimony [food, nevertheless] saw her in distress and was filled with mercy [love] for her; then You, of whom it is written, Adonai is compassionate and merciful [patient and filled with grace. Not forever will Adonai quarrel and not forever will Adonai bear a grudge. Not in accord with our sins does God act towards us and not in accord with our iniquities does God requite us. .... As a father shows mercy to his sons, Adonai shows mercy to those who fear God] (Psalm 103:8-13) and for us, who are your children, the children of your beloved [your friend], the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, how much the more should You be filled with mercy!' Immediately the rain descended and the world enjoyed relief. (Genesis Rabbah 33.3)
The dialogic discourse at the center of the tale

The drought in our story is understood both by the rabbi and by the community as an intentional action by God, to a message to God’s people that they are required to perform a tikkun, an act of reform and repair. The tale regards events in the world as a language in which God addresses the world. By means of the drought, God poses a question to the community; if they wish to be participants in the dialogue, they must reply with an answer, a teshuva (repentance!). Thus does Buber formulates this dialogic dimension of “life with God”: “in the eyes of the Jewish faith, all of life, if we really live it, is a relationship with God.... What happens to me in this life is a message from God, and what I myself do is the answer.” The story before us, then, presents two responses to God’s question, that of the community and that of the divorced husband. What, then, is the difference between those two answers?

The community comes to Rabbi Tanhum with the demand that he decree a public fast. The community is hard-pressed and presses hard on Rabbi Tanhum, since they are an...
agricultural society for whom a drought leaves them without any source of sustenance. For them the withholding of rain is life-threatening. While they sense that what is happening to them come from God, but they have no direct access to God. They turn, therefore, to Rabbi Tanḥuma – the rabbi who is supposed to be, in their view, the intermediary between them and God. But one who looks carefully at their language immediately discovers that even with Rabbi Tanḥuma, their own rabbi, they are not truly engaged in dialogue. They do pose a question to him, but they are not truly attentive to his words in reply to them. From the first moment, they demand that he decree a fast, and they do not ask about the significance of his having tarried so long in doing so. It seems that there is even a tone of complaint in the way they address their rabbi: Why—they are asking—are you not doing what you are obligated to do?

If the local community had asked, as God asks and Rabbi Tanḥuma asks throughout our story, they would have understood that Rabbi Tanḥuma does not decree a series of public fasts—even though, as local rabbi, that would be the explicit demand of him in the framework of halakhah—because he does not believe that in merely performance of the Mishnah’s concrete halakhic demands one can find the true response to the dialogue that God opened up with them by bringing a drought as a question.

Rabbi Tanḥuma’s ear is not deaf to the community’s cry of despair. He too knows that they are faced with a question of life and death. In his eyes, though, the external death, the aridity of the outside world, is a reflection of the “inner death” of the community, their own inner aridity regarding the religious dimension of existence, as seen from the narrator’s worldview.

We have here a principle of symmetry. God responds only to one who himself/herself responds properly, one who knows who knows how to engage in true dialogue with God. First, the inner “rain” must be opened up. Only thereafter will it be joined by its actualization in the external world.
Since the community demands of Rabbi Tanhuma, though, they he accede to the requirements of the law, he eventually acquiesces to their demand—despite the fact that he does not see in the performance of legal requirements a true answer (teshuva) to God’s “question.” Indeed, the anticipated rain, God’s response to their response, does not fall.

**Decoding the Misunderstanding between Rabbi Tanhuma and the Community**

What is the secret of the community’s “inner aridity”? Rabbi Tanhuma gathers the community to himself and attempts to teach them the secret of these events. He addresses them gently, saying “My sons! Be filled with compassion for each other, and then the Holy One, blessed be God, will be filled with compassion for you.”

The same symmetry is highlighted here: the key to the answer, Rabbi Tanhuma tells them, is not, as you think, in the external ritual, not in the performance of the law. There is no value to the fast in and of itself, but rather in changing from within: "be filled with compassion.” The same inner process of opening that is hoped for is what will make possible dialogue with God, enabling God too to be filled with compassion for you.

There is no symmetry that makes possible a true dialogue between acting according to the law, which is the arid, juridical, external action, and divine revelation. Yet, there is a symmetry between *opening one’s heart* and God’s *self-revelation*. That does indeed make dialogue possible.

Rabbi Tanhuma reveals to the community the “correct answer” to God’s question when he tells them, "be filled with compassion." But if we look closely at the community’s response, we see that the community again interprets Rabbi Tanhuma’s words in their
external meaning: they immediately organize a “campaign” of giving tzedakah to the poor!

However, is giving tzedakah to the poor necessarily the same as being filled with compassion on them? The difference between these two formulations is simple: one who is filled with compassion for another gives tzedakah because he senses the other’s profound distress. Thus we have before us a dialogical relationship, an “I-Thou” relationship. One who gives tzedakah to the poor as an external act while his heart is still closed to the other’s distress uses the poor as an object in order to achieve his own personal goal. (For Buber, every technical, mechanical formulation of the law misses the mark, failing to achieve a nuanced listening to the voice of God, which by its very nature is non-recurring and issues a commandment regarding that which is before each and every human being at that particular moment.)

In our instance, the community shows no interest in the poor in and of themselves, as the continuation of the story demonstrates. It makes use of the poor person only in order to do a “mitzvah,” the ritual of giving tzedakah. The poor are a means; the rain is the end, to the point that we might almost state ironically that if there were no poor people in their city, they would apparently have regretted that fact, since their city would be without the objects that enable them to fulfill that mitzvah, which can, as they understand it, solve the problem of the drought for them.

In the first case, in giving tzedakah from a sense of compassion, the act of tzedakah is unitary; one cannot distinguish between the compassion and the giving. They become one united act. This unity is present not only in the actions themselves, but rather is present in the relationship between donor and recipient. Being filled with compassion is clearing a space for gently attending to the world of the other. This opening up of space nullifies, in a sense, the gap between the donor and the recipient and creates a kind of unity between them.
In the second case, the instrumental giving, the action is fragmented: there is a donor, and there is a recipient, and the entire undertaking has a goal toward which the donor directs his actions, a goal beyond the giving itself. We may even say, to put it crudely, that there is a simple calculation at work: the donor gives the recipient some of his assets in order to receive something from God.

**The concept of prayer versus the concept of law as a form of magic**

The drought points to the inner hard-heartedness of the community, that same community that is truly incapable of being filled with compassion for the other and whose concern for itself leaves no room for the other. Now too, even after Rabbi Tanhuma has revealed to them the true meaning of what God wants of them, the community is unable to hearken to the call directed toward them, just as they has earlier failed to hear the appeal addressed to them through the drought itself.

According to the community’s religious concept, a fast should be decreed in response to the plague of drought, because that act is understood by them as a ritual capable of bringing rain. The community believes in the existence of a Superior Power that *decrees* drought, but it thinks that if Rabbi Tanhuma *decrees* a fast, decree versus decree, he will thereby satisfy the will of God, who requires such a fast, and as a result, the rain will fall.

For the community, the fast and the giving of *tzedakah* exert, in a somewhat mysterious manner, an influence upon that Superior Power, fulfill its demands, and motivate it to bring those rains, which were held back on their way to the land. This conception is very close, then, to the definition of magic, as a particular form of knowledge that, according to belief, enables people who have acquired it to mobilize it in order to force the superior powers to act in their interest.
In magic, both the one who orders a magical act for his own benefit and the one who carries it out for remuneration are interested parties acting to advance their own interests. In complete contrast, in the Rabbis’ concept of prayer—represented here by Rabbi Tanhuma—the one offering prayer does not coerce God into doing his own will. The value of the act of prayer is greater and more meaningful the more the one offering the prayer is a disinterested party. In Buber’s words:

“The man who prays pours himself out in unrestrained dependence and knows that he has – in an incomprehensible way – an effect upon God, even though he obtains nothing from God. For when he no longer desires anything for himself, he sees the flame of his effect burning at its highest.”*xvi

Why is this matter so central to the question of prayer? There is a value to the act of prayer only when it does not serve as a means for human beings to attain power; only when it is not an act directed to a personal, egocentric purpose but rather flows from that “opening of the heart,” from that dialogical stance that is open to a conversation with God. The fast, or the giving of tzedakah, or any other act has no value, negative or positive, in and of itself, but only the source within the soul from which it originates.

In the act of distributing tzedakah, members of the community saw a divorced man giving money to his ex-wife. Those two were immediately suspect in their eyes. The community was entirely certain that this money was payment for sexual favors, and it was very disturbed by this, not out of any concern for this impoverished divorcé’s distress and not out of concern about issues of modesty as such, but because it suspected that the “transgression” of which the divorcé and his ex-wife were supposedly guilty would obstruct the arrival of the much-desired rain. They turn to Rabbi Tanhuma, then, in anger and despair, and in total powerless they object, “What’s the point of making such an effort to distribute tzedakah when such a flagrant transgression is being committed in our city right now?!”
But now the public’s true priorities are revealed. When, in the course of the distribution of tzedakah they came upon what appeared to them as an egregious sin in their own city, they were struck by a loss of impetus to continue the distribution of tzedakah. That is a very perplexing response. What does this incident, raising suspicion about improper relations between a divorced couple, have to with tossing the poor and their needs aside? Had that community been immersed in the giving of tzedakah out of true compassion for the poor, had their primary concern been for the profound pain of their recipients and full empathy with the suffering of the other, they would never even have considered abandoning the distribution of tzedakah.

Here, the community’s lack of any true compassion for the poor is exposed, and this “tzedakah campaign” opens up no space for listening to needs of the other. We no realize that this giving of tzedakah is nothing but a self-centered concern clothed in a religious mantle. Otherwise, why do they stop giving tzedakah and return to their rabbi with the peculiar claim that there is no point in their act of tzedakah while “sin” is to be found in their community.

Further reflection on the worldview of the residents of this place reveals, beneath their claim, an anthropomorphic image of God as the angry father bent over His ledger of human actions and calculating precisely the relative weights of the mitzvot and transgressions of this community. According to this “bookkeeper’s” calculus, He distributes or withholds rain on the earth. By this logic, since the serious transgression has already been committed by the divorcé and his ex-wife in their town, there is no purpose in continuing to distribute tzedakah in order to appease the angry father. The die has already been cast.

Now, they think, the weak spot has finally been discovered, and the cause of the drought has been revealed: the scandalous act between the divorced couple. We now
know, then, that the community has thrust the full weight of the responsibility for the distress that has befallen them on the shoulders of the divorced man. They never imagine that they themselves have become obtuse and have not attended properly to God’s appeal. From their perspective, in the normal course of events, the “other,” the “it,”—the divorcé who gave coins to his ex-wife—bears the responsibility for all that has transpired.

Here, now, is the point of the story: the divorced couple are brought before Rabbi Tanhuma, and it becomes clear that not only has no transgression occurred between them but rather this divorced man was the only person in the community who gave tzedakah out of the true motivation of a heart filled with compassion.

We see, then, once again how very precise is the formulation of this midrashic tale as it presents the divorcé’s answer to Rabbi Tanhuma’s question: “‘Why did you give her coins?’ ‘Because I saw her in distress, and I was filled with compassion for her.’” This sentence highlights three central components of our story: the woman’s distress and suffering, seeing her in her pain, and filling up with compassion towards her.

The meaning of the fast in our story: The position of the community versus the position of Rabbi Tanhuma

In light of this analysis, we perceive very clearly the meaning of the fast with which our story opens. The community thinks that the one who fasts “constricts” himself by denial of this body and distancing himself from the “expansion” of eating. As a reward for that, they will be saved by God, who will shower His bounty upon them. They do not understand, however, that the corporeal fast, the obedience to law in and of itself, is nothing but an external factor. Is such the fast that I choose? (Isaiah 58:5). A fast whose self-constriction includes an internal self-constriction, a constriction of the ego and simultaneously the opening of a space for listening to the other. And this is the heart of
the matter. Only that internal constriction makes it possible to be filled with compassion for the other, as was the divorcé. Now we can see the deep significance of the man’s response to the rabbi in an ironic light: it was in the very person who violated society’s law and order and did not behave as was expected of him, thereby arousing public suspicion, that the spontaneous outbreak of true religiosity took place.

Let us imagine for a moment: had the divorce behaved as was customary in his community, the ones who blame him for the drought, he would certainly have succeeded in raising many rationalizations that would permit him to turn a blind eye to his poor, unfortunate ex-wife. Why, after all, should risk false accusations for her sake? She is no longer his wife. However, he is filled spontaneously with that compassion—without any reason or rational calculation, but rather only because of his capacity for listening to her distress—and therefore he pays no attention to the community’s suspicions. Perhaps he disrupted the external public order, but he in fact touched upon the source of the internal divine order. And we realize, in the end, that only by his merit did the rain descend upon the community, whose inner world was arid and devoid of even a drop of religiosity.

We have learned that this, then, is the correct answer to God’s question: in order to answer properly one must ask properly, and to ask properly one has to learn to listen carefully to the question that is asked and to enter into a true dialogue with it. There are two in our story who knew how to ask and to listen to the answer that would come: the divorce, who listened to his ex-wife’s distress, and Rabbi Tanhuma, who, from the outset, listened in a completely different way to the question God asked and who later listened properly to the words of the divorcé. It becomes clear, then, that when a person is opened to this true listening, the concrete expression of this dialogue with God is God’s response to the human response - the blessed advent of rain.
Rabbi Tanhuma Resolves the Tension between the Individual, the Community and God

In this reading of the story the major axis of our tale swings between fruitless ritual represented by the community’s world of I-it and the world of I-You represented by the divorced man. At first it seems as if the narrative structure is built on binary oppositions: on one side, the public, the ritualized distribution of tzedakah, the accusations against the divorcé, and the drought; and on the other side, the individual, the spontaneous human act of giving tzedakah from the heart, and the parallel divine giving of rain from heaven. The divorced man who disregards the arid public order of the society grants to our story spiritual vitality and rescues the community from death both in metaphoric and literal sense. Haim Milikovsky commented to me that the narratives focus on a divorcé who showers compassion on his ex-wife who may well have been divorced for her sins against him and to whom he owes no support by law represents symbolically God who has so-to-speak divorced himself from his people for their sin of their internal alienation from God’s mitzvot. Thus the divorced man’s filling with compassion triggers the divorcing God’s reconciliation with his alienated people.

However, we must still explain the role of Rabbi Tanhuma and his long poetic final prayer at the end of the tale that brings the rain? Why wasn’t the individual's opening of his heart enough to merit Divine rainfall?

The prayer of Rabbi Tanhuma represents the component that joins the public and the divorced individual, who represent separate and opposed forces in the narrative, into a unity. His prayer mediates not only between God and Israel but between the individual in his act of hesed that aroused suspicion and false accusation and the judgmental community.

The rabbi who was supposed to represent the religious establishment in being a “rabbi” aspired to bring his flock mercy and to lead them with a gentle and loving hand. He understood, however, that from the establishment itself with its proclaimed fasts and tzedakah campaign, no salvation could come. It was from the anarchic forces outside the legal establishment that redemption would come. Rabbi Tanhuma felt that despite all his efforts to convey the message about inner compassion to the public, the
community was so imbued with an obtuse heart that it could hard to change it. Using the kabbalist language of arousal from below, we might say that Rabbi Tanhuma looked for the process of salvation to begin in “the lower waters” that bubble up in advance of the arrival of the “upper waters.” Divine blessing would be aroused only from the individual acts of giving outside and even threatening to the social order.

The greatness of Rabbi Tanhuma as the community’s representative (shaliakh tzibur) before God was his capacity for mending the torn garments of social solidarity and to join the separate and opposed components symbolized by the divorced man and the divorced woman. That idea of reunification of individual and community is hinted at in the brief yet very exact phrase: “He summoned them [literally, sent (shaliakh) emissaries after them and brought them] into the public assembly.” Bringing them “into the community” is the supreme act of unification. He brings the great merit – even if it be dangerous, the anarchic religious vitality which is by nature spontaneous embodied in the act of an individual motivated by his heart into the heart of the community who prefer to act according to custom and maintain their inflexible law and order.

The unification of various components at odds in the horizontal axis of the lower world makes possible the renewed unity of the vertical axis. Thus God too becomes the mediator that unites poles just as Rabbi Tanhuma, the shaliakh tzibur, served as a mediator. In appealing to God to mediate, Rabbi Tanhuma calls God by his own title, rabbi / rabban - “Master [Rabban] of all the worlds!” and he speaks to God in the intimate personal nomenclature – “You.” The outcome of this mediation of tension is the flow from on high of hesed, Divine goodness, parallel to the flow of human goodness. For that reason the editor of this collection of midrashim introduces the narrative with the verse and adage:

*Adonai is good to all, and God's mercy is upon all God's works* (Ps. 145:9). Rabbi Tanhuma bar Abin says in the name of Rabbi Aha: “If we see a year of drought coming and the [human] creatures have mercy on one another, then the Holy One will be filled with mercy for us.” (Genesis Rabbah 33.3)