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CREATING OPENINGS TO THE LIGHT OF TORAH

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In *parasha* (weekly Torah portion) Masei, we read, *V'lo tachanifu et-ha-aretz asher atem ba* (VC o, t rat .rtv-, t lphbj , -tku), “And you shall not make the land in which you are [living] into a hypocrite. . . .” (Numbers 35:33) Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that a *country* can become a hypocrite, that is, “present an appearance externally which by no means corresponds to the inner reality.” He goes on to say that, “if you tolerate intentional murder and manslaughter . . . you make the land into a ‘hypocrite’. . . . [since] it deceives the expectation which otherwise you are justified in entertaining from it, it keeps back the blessing that should flow from it. . . .”

Perhaps we were never so deceived in these expectations as we were in Baltimore a few years ago. Walking home from *shul* on Shabbat, we came across the scene of a murder. We didn’t see the actual crime, but we were present at its aftermath, among those who milled around the scene of a shooting where a young man was murdered—we imagine it had something to do with a drug deal gone bad—in a “nice,” mostly Jewish neighborhood.

Seeing that young man lying face down in the driveway, his blood flowing into the ground, made us think of the verse in Genesis (4:11) about the earth having opened its mouth to receive the blood of Abel murdered by his brother Cain.

Like everyone there (or so we imagined), we wondered about the young man’s family, and then we wondered what it would mean for the neighborhood we were living in. Would our neighborhood, having opened its mouth to receive this young man’s blood, be withheld from a blessing? It seemed logical. By this death, had not a blessing already been “held back” from us? And if it had, who would be responsible for restoring it?

What *are* our expectations, deceived or otherwise, for living and receiving a blessing here in the United States? How many of the problems pervading our communities—youth violence and drug addiction, ineffective public schools, insufficient affordable housing, underemployment and unemployment, and government and corporate malfeasance—can we as Jews afford to “tolerate” (read: ignore) without making ourselves *and* the land into hypocrites?

When we consider our acceptance at Sinai of a covenant of service to God, and the benefits that have accrued to us because of it, and when we consider our commissioning as an *am kadosh* (holy people), we must ask ourselves: What happens to us as an *am kadosh* if we remain passive in the face of such problems? And what does it mean for the holiness of our congregations if we remain passive? Do we not undermine our faith in our own power to promote goodness?

Our tradition teaches us that we are given the power to rejuvenate our world in the image of God, that we can transform ourselves, our families and our communities, and ultimately our cities and nation. Of course, at the same time it also teaches us that we are little more than dust. And that is how we often feel—like cosmic particles floating in time and space, powerless and hopeless—despite our many accomplishments and acquisitions.

Faith and Hope

Faith that we can respond in the image of God is accessible to us, but we must be willing to follow our *yetzer ha-tov*, our inclination to act for the good, and to put our bad inclination (*yetzer ha-ra*) in the service of God—*despite* our reason and experience. We must accept that our past disappointments and failures in political and social action are not the ultimate measure of what’s possible if we

use our God-given powers to demand equality, equity, and accountability in the institutional life of our country, nor are they the definitive test of our capacity for faith. Perhaps our disabling fear of powerlessness and losing control comes from denying our relationship with God. We would do well to remember that we are the offspring of a Limitless One—without beginning or end—with an undiminished capacity to respond and sanctify all the creation, ourselves included.

Our experience is that hope mostly reflects our persistence in *doing* good—the better we do, the more hopeful we become. And our ability to do good comes to us not only directly from God but through our people and our *kahal* (congregational community). We become more hopeful when we act with a *kahal* to fulfill Torah’s vision for ameliorating our pressures and satisfying our hopes and expectations in the world.

But suppose that we have faith and hope in relationship with others in our congregation, what exactly are we called to do to transform the world? How shall we *live* our faith and hope, as a *kahal*, in the day-to-day course of our lives? What do we see ourselves doing together beyond our families and our congregation?

Openings to the Light of Torah

In *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs), we find the word *kharakim* (כחרכי) It literally means lattice—like openings, say in a fence—through which one may see to what lies beyond. According to the *Sef-er haHinukh*, it is through the *kharakim* that God and Israel, analogized as the two lovers, view each other. God looks through to see what is happening to Israel (Rashi, *Shir HaShirim* 2:9), and Israel looks through to see what God expects of it—the enlightening *mitzvot* (commandments) of the Torah (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 15:38-39).

We believe that our task is to create openings, *kharakim*, for doing the *mitzvot*, as a *kahal poalei tzedek* (a congregational community of doers of justice and righteousness)—gauged to relieve pressures and realize hopes, in our own lives and congregational community, and in the surrounding secular world—and to encourage others to do the same by supporting them, challenging them, and mentoring them.

How do we create *kharakim*? The word’s singular form, *kharakh* (כחכ) is an acronym: The first letter, *khet* (כ) stands for *khozeh* (כוז) or visionary. The second letter, *resh* (ר), stands for *rabi* (רבי) or teacher. The third letter, *khof* (פ), stands for *kohein* (כוי) or priestly keeper of sacred space and time.

- As a *khozeh* or visionary we are called to *articulate the vision* of Days of Mashiakh (Messiah), which Torah bequeaths to us. Whatever our differences, we share in our calling the

wisdom from Proverbs that without a common vision we shall perish.

- As a *rabi* or teacher we are called to *teach others* the link between the vision of Days of Mashiakh and keeping sacred space and time. That link is our combined action in the world, flowing from God’s blessings and *mitzvot*.
- As a *kohein* or priest we are called to *keep sacred space and time*. Sacred is what we sanctify repeatedly in the image of God. When we truly respond to God’s blessings and *mitzvot* in our daily lives, we create pathways to action. Our rituals and liturgy create opportunities to reflect on, celebrate, commemorate, and recharge that action.

All of us together can create *kharakim*—new and renewed openings to the light of Torah. We can begin by getting to know others in our community or by getting to know them better, by creating opportunities to hear their day-to-day pressures and hopes and, equally important, by sharing ours with them. Then we can work together to satisfy our common wants and needs—to relieve our pressures and realize our hopes.

If we are to be a *khevra* of visionaries, teachers, and keepers of the sacred, helping to bring the light of the Torah into the world, then we must become informed and active citizens—contributors to the dialogue and decision-making in the public square. As a working *khevra shel kharakim* (literally, a group of the openings) we can become a compelling force, bolstering spirituality, religiosity, family, community, productivity, and democracy.

Fear & Rejoicing

As a *khevra shel kharakim*, then, the venue for our action is not only our own *kehilla*, but also the public square, where we can bring Torah’s vision and path to life in action that affects day-to-day life.

How is it possible to hear the pressures and disappointed hopes of others and, given the magnitude of their troubles and the obstacles to relieving them, not once again become discouraged?

In *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes), King Solomon, like many contemporary Jews, cries out at the madness he sees: “I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” (2:17) Like us, he despaired because of the political corruption and injustice of his time: “Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors. . . .” (4:1) Like us, he consoled himself with intoxicants and other desperate diversions: “I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly. . . .” (2:3)

If, as Solomon says, “all is vanity” (emptiness), how can we sustain faith and hope?

Kohelet ends with the injunction, “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is all of man.” We may learn from *Kohelet* that we are not alone in this struggle to transform the world in the image of God. Regardless of our station in life, we all share some of the pain and the potential of the present moment. And we are all subject to the future, whether or not we help to shape it.

By acting together in the image of God to create *kharakim*, we can multiply our spirit to make visible the light of Torah; we can multiply our efforts to ensure the future of our people and the community in which we live; and we can extend our longevity to bring Days of Mashiakh.

This is not a burden to be feared but a cause for rejoicing: “There is no sadness before the Holy One. . . .” (Hagigah 5b) We are joyful when we make God present in the world, because of the *simkhah shel mitzvah*, rejoicing in the commandment that leads to a life fulfilled in God.

Yet, as it says in Bereshit Rabbah (98:14), “everything is bound up with waiting”—which can be excruciatingly painful in our present circumstances. Rabbi Hanokh Zundel ben Joseph of Bialistock (d. 1867) reminds us that when we suffer, we hope. We hope to sanctify the Divine Name, to do an important act with our lives, one that praises God and goodness—not with empty words or gestures, but action that transforms the world in God’s image. We hope for Days of Mashiakh through our willingness to wait, not passively but actively, refusing to give up.

Avodat Khevera shel Kharakim

This, then, is the *avodah* (holy service) of a *khevera shel kharakim* acting within a *kahal poalei tzedek*: to work through a vision *l’takein olam* (to repair the world); to study, teach, and act on the blessings and commandments of Torah that make that repair possible and guide its path; and to sanctify our action with prayer and song.*

We can’t escape the sickness of the world in which we live. It is as true in its consequences for us as it was for Solomon: Without God and Torah there is no righteousness—only the peculiar predilections of autonomous individuals; without righteousness there is no truth—only the disingenuous double-speak of spin masters; without truth there is no justice—only the self-dealing privileges of the powerful; without justice there is no freedom—only the chaos and degradation of lawlessness; without freedom there is no peace—only the oppressive silence of tyranny; and without peace there is no kindness—only the procedural formality of bureaucratic functionaries.

The light from which righteousness, truth, justice, freedom, peace, and kindness flow is the light that together we can make more visible as visionaries, teachers, and keepers of the sacred, as a *khevera shel kharakim*, creating openings for a *kahal poalei tzedek* to do *mitzvot* that can transform the world.

The tradition we have inherited is ancient and treasured, but it carries an obligation to sustain and apply it to the challenges of our time. As a *khevera shel kharakim* serving God, we can become more inspired and more inspirational creators of openings to the light of Torah.

* A detailed approach to the work of a *khevera shel kharakim* within a *kahal poalei tzedek* is described in our manual, *Gather the People—Organizing for Awe*, which is available online at http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/GATHER_THE_PEOPLE.pdf.

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