

Dancing the King's Dance

Toldot – Rav Hanan Schlesinger

"A parable of a king who had a daughter who was good, pleasant, beautiful and perfect. He married her to a royal prince, and clothed, crowned and bejeweled her, giving her much money. Is it possible for the king to ever leave his daughter? You will agree that it is not. Is it possible for him to be with her constantly? You will also agree that it is not. What can he then do? He can place a window between the two, and whenever the father needs the daughter, or the daughter needs the father, they can come together through the window."

So reads section 54 of The Book of Illumination, one of the earliest and most seminal works of Jewish mysticism. The story, say the kabalists, is about the relationship between God and the world. The Infinite One is by nature everywhere, filling all reality and leaving no room for anything else. This however, precludes the possibility of the existence of anything other than Him. But were God to remove Himself from any place, there would be no gain. Under such circumstances nothing could exist either, for without the Presence of the Ultimate Vitality, the possibility of anything coming into being or sustaining itself is null and void. The solution to the paradox is the window. It symbolizes compromise between the two opposing poles. God will not remove himself from anywhere but will rather attenuate His Presence, partially contracting Himself and thereby allowing room for the world while yet maintaining a connection to it.

The unbounded overflowing of God everywhere is represented by Abraham. He gives of himself freely, without boundaries, as we have seen in the previous weeks Torah portions. He is the symbol of hesed, of loving-kindness. No person and no place are unfitting for his abundant and unlimited care, concern, and benevolence.

Isaac, as we see especially clearly in this week's Torah reading, is just the opposite. He knows no initiative, he ventures into no new territory. Most of his deeds are repetitions of his father's behavior. Passive, never asserting himself, even allowing himself to be bound on the altar



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without protest or question, he seems to be lacking an independent personality. In Kabala, Isaac symbolizes gevurah, ultimate self-restraint, self-nullification.

The world, as we saw above, is created and sustained by neither extreme by itself, but rather through an admixture of both. Balance is the key.

So too in our own lives. The way to live is as the King relates to His daughter. We must give but not smother. And while we must hold back, we dare not retreat completely.

Too much good, it turns out, is a bad thing. Love, even love, can run amok. It can suffocate the other. And in its exclusive outward orientation, it can blind the giver to the need to turn inward and spend time on recalibrating his or her own spiritual compass.

Extreme self restraint may come from a place of humility. Humility is a good thing, but not when it prevents others from enjoying what it is that we can give them. Everyone has something to contribute. When we completely stifle ourselves, we end up being selfish. Others may need our vitality and insight.

Life is a dance, a balancing act moving between opposing extremes. There are no easy answers or pat formulas. Sometimes more emphasis needs be placed here, and sometimes the other pole must be given its due. That's why one patriarch is not enough. Isaac comes to check the polar tendency of his father. The elder is completed by the younger. And the younger is completed by the elder. It's all in the relationship between the two.

And that brings us back to the window connecting - and separating - between the King and His daughter. We dance our dance following in the footsteps of the King.



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