Awakening the Pintele Yid
Rabbi Michael S. Siegel | 9/22/2015 | Kol Nidre 5776

To sleep, perchance to Dream; aye, there’s the rub, For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come, When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There’s the respect That makes Calamity of so long life:
For who would bear the Whips and Scorns of time?

Shakespeare places these now famous words into the mouth of his great and disturbing character Hamlet. The great bard presents a man sharing his innermost thoughts suspended between life and death. Hamlet contemplates death by his own hand and tries to understand the eternal sleep that follows.

What of those whose sleep is involuntary?

Between the years of 1916 and 1927 approximately 5 million people were affected by a sleeping sickness so acute that 1/3 of those stricken could not be woken from their sleep. Patients who suffered but survived often failed to fully recover. They would sit conscious and aware, yet not fully awake: motionless and speechless all day, every day for years on end.

To sleep, perchance to dream.

Imagine yourself as a neuro-psychiatrist assigned to a hospital in a suburb of New York in 1966, a half century after the beginning of the outbreak. The hospital was founded in 1919 to attend to these exact types of patients. Now this place housed the largest number of the survivors, 80 of the patients have an illness called encephalitis lethargica. Half of the group slept the entire day unless something would startle them awake and then they might start talking and almost immediately fall back asleep, while the others were somewhat functional in a limited way though they slept a great deal. Oliver Sacks described it as a walk through a wax museum, and his patients as dormant volcanos.

Many of these people had been in the same place for nearly 50 years. In 1967 Dr. Sacks learned of a new drug called L. Dopa. It was developed for people with Parkinson’s disease. Dr. Sacks wanted to try it out on his patients, and the results were astonishing. It had the effect of replacing a missing neurotransmitter in the brain. Suddenly people who were frozen within themselves, were released from their sleep and came alive. Dr. Sacks wrote a book about his experiences entitled: Awakenings. It is a fascinating study, which tracks a number of the patients before and after taking the miracle drug. Some of Dr. Sack’s patients were able to return to life, meet with family and even leave the hospital. Others existed in between sleep and wakefulness for the remainder of their days. Still others had such adverse reactions that the drug needed to be withdrawn.

One such patient was Rosie a 64 year old who awoke and immediately and began using phrases, and singing songs that came directly from 1926 the year that she succumbed to
the illness. Sacks writes: *She indicates that in her nostalgic state she knew perfectly well that it was 1969 and that she was 64 years old. But that she felt that it was 1926 and she was 21; she adds that she can’t really imagine what it’s like being older than 21; because she has never really experienced it.* Later she told the doctor that she hated this world that she had awoken to, its television, its media, and its music. All she wanted was to return to 1926. In the end Rose chose to return to her sleep state never to be awoken again.

*To sleep perchance to dream!*

What Dr. Sacks could not have known is that at the end of his life he, himself, would awaken from a self-imposed slumber of more than a half century. However, Oliver Sack’s sleep was not physical it was spiritual, familial and very Jewish. His reflection on the experience was published in the New York Times over the summer. You may have seen it.

The article began with a picture of his childhood in England. Sacks was born to a very large family. Both of his parents were doctors but they were scrupulous in their observance of Shabbat. He describes Shabbat in his home.

*Around midday on Friday, my mother doffed her surgical identity and attire and devoted herself to making gefilte fish and other delicacies for Shabbos. Just before evening fell, she would light the ritual candles, cupping their flames with her hands, and murmuring a prayer. We would all put on clean, fresh Shabbos clothes, and gather for the first meal of the Sabbath, the evening meal. My father would lift his silver wine cup and chant the blessings and the Kiddush, and after the meal, he would lead us all in chanting the grace.*

In his teens, Oliver Sacks found himself attracted to other boys. His father engaged him in a conversation on the subject. Sacks confided in his father and asked him not to tell his mother. Here I quote from the article:

He *did* tell her, and the next morning she came down with a look of horror on her face, and shrieked at me: “You are an abomination. I wish you had never been born.”

*The matter was never mentioned again, but her harsh words made me hate religion’s capacity for bigotry and cruelty.*

At that moment Dr. Sacks determined that he would sever his ties with his family and his religion. His father's betrayal and his mother's cruel rejection made it impossible to stay connected. Dr. Oliver Sacks determined that he would sever his ties with his family and his religion. The year was 1947. He moved to America where he knew no one and started a new life and became a celebrated physician and author.

The article continues:

*But in the spring of 2014, hearing that my cousin Marjorie — a physician who had been a*
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protégée of my mother’s and had worked in the field of medicine till the age of 98 — was nearing death, I phoned her in Jerusalem to say farewell. Her voice was unexpectedly strong and resonant, with an accent very much like my mother’s. “I don’t intend to die now,” she said, “I will be having my 100th birthday on June 18th. Will you come?”

I said, “Yes, of course!” When I hung up, I realized that in a few seconds I had reversed a decision of almost 60 years. It was purely a family visit. I celebrated Marjorie’s 100th with her and extended family. I felt embraced by my family in a way I had not known since childhood.

He then describes the Shabbat meal more than a half century later:

The peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, infused everything, and I found myself drenched with a wistfulness, something akin to nostalgia, wondering what if: What if A and B and C had been different? What sort of person might I have been? What sort of a life might I have lived?

Not long after his visit Dr. Oliver Sacks learned that he had metastatic cancer. Here is how he ended the article:

And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life — achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one’s life as well, when one can feel that one’s work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest.

Here, a man who had imposed a deep spiritual sleep upon himself had awoken and was able to come full circle and see Shabbat rest as a metaphor for eternal rest. Judaism, which had become such a source of pain for this man was now a font of comfort.

The article was published on August 14th and Dr. Oliver Sacks died on August 30th.

To sleep perchance to dream.

I tell you the story of Oliver Sacks on this holy night and his religious epiphany because it concerns something much deeper than the irony of the man who wrote a book entitled Awakening only to find himself being awoken. It is more than a story about a Jew coming back to his roots. No, I tell you this story because it is a beautiful explication of the reality of something that has never been seen but exists nonetheless: the Pintele yid: the Jewish spark, the flame of Yiddishkeit that never dies. It is the indestructible ember of Jewishness that exists within each one of us here tonight, and that always has the potential to burn brightly, sometimes unexpectedly.

While Dr. Sack went about the business of his life the pintele yid remained. The good doctor may have slept an imposed Jewish sleep but that Pintele Yid never disappeared, and at the end of his life whether by the warmth of family and their acceptance, the sight, the smell and the experience of a Shabbat dinner, or by the specter of death, the spark was awoken within him.
Oliver Sack’s story, while quite powerful and moving, is not unique. There is the story of one of the leaders of world Jewry wanted to find out what had happened to the “missing Jewish children” of Poland, those who, during the war, had been adopted by Christian families and brought up as Catholics. He decided that the easiest way was through food. He organized a large banquet and placed advertisements in the Polish press, inviting whoever believed they had been born a Jew to come to this free dinner. Hundreds came, but the evening was on the brink of disaster since none of those present could remember anything of their earliest childhood – until the man asked the person sitting next to him if he could remember the song his Jewish mother had sung to him before going to sleep. He began to sing Ro-Shin-kes: Rozhinkes mit mandlen (‘Raisins and almonds’) the old Yiddish lullaby. Slowly others joined in, until the whole room was a chorus. Sometimes all it takes is a song to awaken the pintele yid.

I too have witnessed the indestructible power of the Pintele Yid, that eternal spark many times in my Rabbinate.

- There are those born Jewish and have chosen to disassociate themselves from God, tradition and the Jewish people and find themselves coming back for reasons they cannot quite articulate.
- The person who seemingly had everything and yet felt that something was missing until they discovered the fulfillment of Jewish life and community, until they reignited the pintele yid.
- The person knocked down by a life event suddenly finding the answers that they seek in some aspect of Judaism.
- The Jews by choice who felt an affinity for Judaism their entire life and through study and practice discovered the Pintele Yid within.

While the Pintele Yid is part of what brings Jews back to Judaism, it is also natural to look for meaning in Judaism at life cycle moments, birth, marriage, and death. They are crossroad moments when people have to decide how to continue their lives. The couple giving birth has to decide what type of home they want to create for their child, or what type of background they want to offer their new baby. When couples decide to marry and stand on the precipice of a new life together they are open to a conversation on meaning, purpose and spirituality. This would include intermarried couples. While I will not perform the wedding I make myself available to help prepare the wedding couple so that they will feel more connected to the Jewish concepts of marriage and tradition. In so doing I seek to fan that Jewish flame. Finally, when people lose a loved one and feel destabilized we make a point of inviting them in after the funeral just to talk, to learn a bit about the Jewish approach to death, mourning, the afterlife and the tradition touches that pintele yid and it ignites and the Jewish spark is awakened. In each case we make the most of the opportunity by introducing people to meaningful texts, ancient wisdom, and Jewish creativity on their terms and engaging the Jewish ember within.
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Rather than shrieking gevalt and wringing our hands at every new study, at every statistic about intermarriage, or people opting out of Judaism, it is time that we create as many opportunities for Jews to engage with our tradition and with each other. We are long past the time that institutions can answer the question that they want people to ask as opposed to the one that they are asking. I am proud to tell you that Anshe Emet is working to be that place each and every day and we are succeeding. While I can’t tell you what the Jewish future is, I know with the fullness of my being that there is reason to be optimistic. Despite all of our challenges, despite the reality of assimilation the Pintele Yid remains waiting for the L Dopa, the word, that situation, that experience that will cause it to burn brightly again.

Tonight begins the most unique day of the Jewish year. The Torah describes Yom Kippur as follows: “Hukat olam lkaper al bnai Yisroel mikohl hatotam AHAT BSHANA: And it shall be an enduring law for all time—to make expiation for the children of Israel from all of their Sins—ONCE a YEAR.” Ahat bshana. Why does the Torah emphasize that it is but once a year. No other holiday has this addendum. What is that phrase trying to teach us?

Permit me to suggest the following: Yom Kippur is a day that stands alone, it is sui generous. It is devoid of the three f’s of every Jewish holiday: Food, Family and Fun. We sit in synagogue for an entire day listening to the liturgy, pounding our chests, focusing on significant concepts: from our relationships, to our faith, to the state of the Jewish people to death itself. The wonder of the day is that Jews come to synagogue in greater numbers on Yom Kippur than any other day on the Jewish calendar. Perhaps it is because on this day Jews open ourselves up to Judaism and experience the Pintele Yid in the fullest way.

The question that I would like you to consider as we begin this holiest of days together is what will become of that Jewish flame tomorrow. Will we be like Rosie, the woman who chose to go back to sleep rather than to allow herself to experience the world around her? What will we take from the day and apply during the year, or will we return to that spiritual slumber until next Yom Kippur? That my friends is in our individual hands.
Permit me to suggest ways to fully experience that Jewish spark during the course of the day.

When we rise for the Vidui the Ashamnu Prayer let us not beat our breasts to show God how sorry we are but instead let us imagine ourselves knocking on hearts so that they might open to those around us and to ourselves.

When we recite Shma Koleynu, God Hear our Voices take a moment to consider what exactly you would want God to hear in that moment. What is the innermost prayer in your being? What is your priority for the coming year? Don’t cast God aside. Instead, take a moment to share what you are grateful for as you prepare to enter a new year.

When we sing Avinu Malkeinu dare to open your soul to a God that wants to be in relationship with you as both parent and creator.

When we read from the Torah or the Mahzor let us take the time to engage in Jewish text study, reading the commentary on the page and in so doing be in conversation with our tradition.

When we rise hear the Avodah Service let us consider what it means to pray not only for yourself and your family, but what are your prayers for your people and the world in the coming year? What will you do to actualize those prayers?

When we rise for Yizkor let us fully experience the Pintele Yid of those who came before us and helped to form our Jewish souls.

When we stand before the gates of the Ark during Neilah let us imagine being open to the messages of the day, and applying them throughout the year.

Let us take time during the hours of Yom Kippur to consider the powerful story of Dr. Oliver Sacks and reflect on the Pintele Yid within us. To sleep perchance to dream, or to awaken that Jewish spark and make the Jewish dream a reality in the year to come.

The choice is ours.