

REFLECTIONS

Surrendering Secrets

By Robert Pollack

We read in Nitzavim, Devarim 29, line 28

“Ha-Nistarot LaHaShem Eloheinu, v’Ha-Niglot, L’anu ul’Vaneinu ad-olam la’asot et-kol-divrei haTorah haZot.” “Concealed acts concern the Lord our God; but with overt acts it is for us and our children to apply all the provisions of this Teaching.”

This is of course a very clever and subtle obligation: On reflection, it is saying that concealed acts also require us to apply the provisions of “this Teaching/Torah,” but for concealed acts, the provision is precisely that we are to admit them before HaShem so that they are no longer concealed. And that is what Kol Nidre is about: Full repentance requires the full surrendering of secrets.

I wish to share with you all a story of a decision to let go of a secret, and its unexpected consequences. The story begins with an excerpt from a talk I gave on winning an award from a synagogue about five years ago:

“... A little history: My mother’s parents came to New York from Vinnitsa in Ukraine, not far from the birthplace of the Baal Shem Tov. They were more pious than learned, with a tendency toward superstition; I clearly remember the red thread tied around my brother’s neck when he had a bad case of appendicitis. My father’s parents came from Ciechanowiec near Bialystok in Poland. They were small-businesspeople, neither learned nor pious, but serious about their Jewishness; one of my grandfather’s brothers left Poland for an illegal immigration to Palestine in 1936, under Jabotinsky’s wing.

“My parents both shunned the synagogue, choosing instead to raise my brother and me in the ideals of a totally secular vision of eventual Redemption through political action. That meant that though I learned Yiddish—the language

of the Jewish working-class—I was carefully kept from Hebrew, and my Bar Mitzvah, such as it was, would not have been an event any of us would want to revisit.

Neither of my parents was able to attend high school, dropping out in their early teens to work, and then being trapped in the great economic Depression of the 1930s. Though their political convictions kept me from shul, they had no hesitation about seeing that I went to school. When I entered Columbia College in the fall of 1957, I was traveling not that much less of a distance from my parents as their parents had traveled when they crossed the ocean 50 years before. When I met Amy and we married in 1961, it was a union of two secretly pious but very uninformed Jews.”

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All this was true, but it was not the whole truth. I had kept the missing part secret for half a century. I was able to state it in public only a few years ago, when I was asked to present a question to Rabbi Steinsaltz, before an audience of hundreds of observant Jews who had gathered together to honor him.

As part of such evenings’ festivities, the rabbi intends to teach, and toward that end I was given the honor to sit on the stage with him and pose a question. I took it as the chance at last to repent from my secret, by telling this story, in the form of a question to the rabbi:

“... here is a simple family problem for you: What is the right thing to do in terms

of honoring one’s parents, when one or both of one’s parents are dishonorable? How does one balance the obligation to honor them with the obligation to honor one’s country, one’s fellow Jews, and one’s own family?

“Take a person who has had some reasonable success in life. Imagine his life some 40 or 50 years ago. He is an American boy with two Jewish parents, themselves born of immigrants from Poland and Ukraine. Both parents have been open members of the U.S. Communist Party from before the war, through the worst periods of McCarthyism. Now the boy is in college, and he meets one of the first Soviet visitors to an American university and introduces him to his parents.

“The Russian is of course a KGB agent. He recruits the father, and the father attempts to get the son to obtain secrets from his school laboratory, for the Russian. The son declines, chooses to keep silent rather than turning in his father, marries, and goes to Israel as a scientist, supported with grants from the American government to carry out cancer research in Israel. There the father visits and tries to get the son to obtain secrets from Israeli military research establishments. The son again declines and chooses to keep the father’s behavior a secret.

“The father and mother die, unrepentant; the son remains burdened with this story, which he feels he must continue to keep secret. Now, what is your advice to the son: How was he to honor his parents while they were alive; how is he to honor them now?

“I’m really curious, as this is of course my own story.”

The rabbi’s answer was clear. He referred to the commandment that can be read as saying, “Honor your parents; I am your God.”



AMY POLLACK

He said that, according to Jewish law and tradition, to honor one's parents need not be to obey them; rather, one honors them by following the laws given by God to Moses at Sinai, regardless of whether or not one's parents approve.

His answer was of course not so schematic; rather, it was a set of stories in turn. In one I remember, from Talmud, he said that when a judge receives testimony concerning his father's role in a criminal act, the son may pass any judgment on the father short of the death penalty, which he may not exact; in another, Talmud says that a father may not escape punishment from the court for abusing his child on grounds that a child is

his property; he is to be punished as if he had abused a total stranger.

The rest of the evening went on as if I were in a dream. I had lived for four decades in silence, certain until then that the secret of my father's requests could not be spoken without the direst consequences to me and everyone around me. But the Soviet Union had fallen, I was a Zakayn myself, and people were crying with me, not yelling at me.

As the evening wound down an old—really old—man came up to me to tell me the following story in turn: Almost 60 years earlier he and his father had been taken by

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the Gestapo to a death camp. His father had told him to stand by him on line; until then this man was, as a boy, absolutely enthralled by his father, and he had never disobeyed him. At that moment though, he did disobey, and went to another line, with younger men and boys. Of course his father was on the line that led directly to death by suffocation, and his corpse was burnt to ashes while the boy was left to live.

Only that night after I spoke, he told me, was he able at last to tell anyone this story; he too had kept it a secret for even longer, afraid that if he told it, he would be severely punished for having disobeyed, and thereby having lived while his father died. Like me, he said, he had kept alive a fear for decades past the time when anyone could, or would, punish him for any reason attached to his own behavior at an impossible moment. We embraced, he left, and I went to tell the rabbi what had happened. The rabbi's response was immediate:

"That's why you were here tonight; not for me, not for yourself, but for him."

Let us all take this precious time to offer them up in silence to heaven, in the full understanding that we cannot know their real meaning, but that until we do this, our repentance cannot be complete, no matter what we say in prayer. ■

Robert Pollack and his wife Amy have been members of BJ since 1994. He's a Professor at Columbia University, and the Director of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion. She's an artist, and a long-standing member of the BJ Lunch Program. They are presently collaborating on an illustrated book on evolution for college students. This article is dedicated to the memory of Bob and Esther Broner.