

## Of Kings, Messages, Journeys: Parables of Teshuvah

### King and Son, God and Us

A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a journey of one hundred days. The son's friends said to him: "Return to your father!" The son replied: "I cannot." Then his father sent word to him. "Return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way." So God says, "Return to me, and I will return to you." (*Pesikta Rabbati 184*)

### Two Tales from the Baal Shem Tov

1) And some say that the Holy One does this in order to appear to a person that He is distant, and so that the person should strive to get very close. The Baal Shem Tov, his memory is a blessing, used to tell the following parable before the blowing of the *shofar* [on Rosh Hashanah]: "Once there was a very wise king. He made [an] illusory [castle with illusory] walls, towers and gates. Then he commanded that [his subjects] should come to him through the [illusory walls and] gates and the towers. Then he scattered before each and every gate royal treasures. [In this way] when someone came to the first gate, he took the money and left. And so it went [with one seeker after another] until the beloved son came with great determination and proceeded [to walk through one wall after another] right up to his father the king. Then he realized that there was nothing separating himself from his father. Everything was an illusion." (*Keter Shem Tov, 1794*)

2) The *teki'a* sound of the shofar is a simple sound, the simple cry from the depths of one's heart when he departs from "God is one," etc. The Ba'al Shem Tov clarified this metaphor with the following parable:

There was a king who had an only son. [The son] studied well and was beloved by him as the apple of his eye. The king decided that his son would travel to other countries to learn different kinds of wisdom and to know how to lead people in order that he become able to lead the country in a wonderful manner. His father gave him ministers and servants and great wealth so that he would be able to go and tour the countries and the islands of the sea and thus achieve a higher level than that he had while residing at home with his father.

After a long time everything his father had given him had been spent on luxurious travel expenses, since he was used to living in luxury. Most of it was lost because he added desire upon desire for many things – he spent so much on these that he eventually sold everything he owned. Meanwhile the son had journeyed to a land so distant that even his father was unknown there. When he told them that he was the son of king so-and-so, not only did they not believe him – they did not even recognize his father's name. When he saw that there remained no remedies to enliven his soul in its troubles, he decided to return to his father's country. However, due to the long time that had passed, he had forgotten his country's language.

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[And the king would sit everyday by the palace window, watching for his son's return. And all his ministers would tell the king: "Surely that son has died and will never return."]

When he reached his country, what could he do, having forgotten its language? He began to signal to them that he was their king's son, and he became a joke to them: How could it be that the son of such a great king should go so ragged and worn!? They beat him on his head and by the time he reached the king's court he was covered with wounds and injuries and bruises. He started signaling to them [to the king's guards] that he was the son of the king, but they paid no attention to him. Then he began crying out loudly so that the king would recognize his voice. When the king heard the sound of his cries and weeping, he said: "That is the voice of my son crying out in his distress!" The love for his son awoke within him and he brought him into his home and embraced him and kissed him..." (*Keter Shem Tov*)

### **An Imperial Message**

The Emperor, so a parable runs, has sent a message to you, the humble subject, the insignificant shadow cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun; the Emperor from his deathbed has sent a message to you alone. He has commanded the messenger to kneel down by the bed, and has whispered the message to him; so much store did he lay on it that he ordered the messenger to whisper it back into his ear again. Then by a nod of the head he has confirmed that it is right. Yes, before the assembled spectators of his death—all the obstructing walls have been broken down, and on the spacious and loftily mounting open staircases stand in a ring the great princes of the Empire--before all these he has delivered his message. The messenger immediately sets out on his journey; a powerful, an indefatigable man; now pushing with his right arm, now with his left, he cleaves a way for himself through the throng; if he encounters resistance he points to his breast, where the symbol of the sun glitters; the way is made easier for him than it would be for any other man. But the multitudes are so vast; their numbers have no end. If he could reach the open fields how fast he would fly, and soon doubtless you would hear the welcoming hammering of his fists on your door. But instead how vainly does he wear out his strength; still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; he must next fight his way down the stair; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; the courts would still have to be crossed; and after the courts the second outer palace; and once more stairs and courts; and once more another palace; and so on for thousands of years; and if at last he should burst through the outermost gate—but never, never can that happen—the imperial capital would lie before him, the center of the world, crammed to bursting with its own sediment. Nobody could fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself.

*(Franz Kafka; written in 1917, published in 1919 in the Prague Jewish weekly)*

- What are the echoes of the Jewish teachings in Kafka's story?
- If God is the King/Emperor, who/what is the messenger?