



Seeking Shalom

Clay Nelson © 16 September 2018

I recently finished a fantasy novel. I used to think the genre met my needs for escape literature. Sometimes it does but often it invites me into nearly obsessive theological reflection. This particular novel did the latter. It had the prerequisite number of dragons, warlocks, mythical characters to capture my imagination. There were super villains and great heroes. As the novelist is a woman, there were at least as many women heroes as men — a refreshing change. There was another unexpected feature to the characters. The heroes were flawed and some had done horrible deeds in their past. The villains, on the other hand, were at times unexpectedly noble and self-sacrificing.

The premise of the story is a struggle to save humanity from some particularly evil immortals who want to unravel its future, effectively ending the human race. Some particularly good immortals in league with some humans with awesome gifts seek to stop them. Not a particularly unusual storyline for such books. What truly got my theological juices roiling was the relationships between the characters. For instance, a young orphaned teenager, on a road of self-discovery, chooses to bond himself to some proven disreputable immortals, seeing a good in them to which others are blind and of which they themselves are unaware. Because the bond is life-long and unbreakable, it is a remarkable act of trust by each party. The young man and the immortals in turn each find the relationship transforming and become key to the book's satisfying ending.

Another intriguing aspect to the mortal/immortal relationship is the struggle with remembering. The immortals have to live into eternity remembering misdeeds, mistakes, failures, and losses from their distant past. It affects each differently. Some are cynical. Others resigned. They all, however, envy mortals who can at least wipe the slate clean in death. But they underestimate how those same things cripple the mortal heroes, keeping them from fully using their gifts and living into the future with joy and hope.

Perhaps because I knew I had writing this sermon looming in my future, I found the novel interacting with the idea of shalom. Most of us know it is Hebrew for peace. But it has a more important understanding — wholeness. And deeper yet, it is about being in right relationship with ourselves, our neighbours, and the mystery

some choose to call God, but which I understand to be the mystery that exists within, between and beyond us. Shalom, to be at peace, requires being at one with all. The theologically inclined call this process of seeking to be at one atonement.

Atonement may sound simple in a theology paper or sermon, like one day you wake up and know you are at one with the universe. The truth is the process is really a path we are called to walk through life. Unfortunately, there are few signposts or landmarks to guide us. In the novel, some of the benevolent immortals know the paths their mortal allies are on and where they lead but can't tell them out of fear of altering them. Knowing where we want to go is different from knowing we will get there. The former requires making choices, often difficult ones. Which choice is moral? Which is ethical? Are moral and ethical the same? Does one require short-term sacrifice for long term benefit or is it simply self-serving? Do an individual's needs outweigh the common good or vice versa? Each choice seems to determine the path we are on. There are innumerable choices like these we face all the time, with no way of knowing which is the best choice at the time. All we know is we must make a choice. Later, we might learn by its consequences, even if unintended, if it was a good or bad one. It is a little like going on a holiday without an itinerary.

If we have certain knowledge that we will get where we intend in the end, because of fate or the hand of God or we are simply predestined to do so, we become pawns no longer accountable for the moves we make on the board. Instead of a player in the game we call life, we are played.

Last Tuesday was Yom Kippur, the close of the holiest days of the Jewish year, which began with Rosh Hashanah. In Jewish tradition it is an occasion to choose to become a player and not just played. The good news is you don't have to be Jewish to play.

According to legend, on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, the Angel of Life writes each of our destinies for the year to come. During the ten days following, the Book of Life is kept open. If during that time we merely try to understand how to take the Torah's insights with us into the everyday world, the Angel of Life must reconsider what has been written. Just reviewing how we have lived our lives in the past year will alter the future. The shofar will sound at the end of Yom Kippur. Legend says that at that moment the Book of Life for the year to come is sealed. All is written. Our destiny is set.

The days after Rosh Hashanah and before Yom Kippur are a time to see ourselves as we truly are without the trappings which may clutter our days and ways. What we will see is awesome. We are

called to stand in awe of the universe within us and the universe that surrounds us. Not surprisingly these are called “The Days of Awe.”

On Yom Kippur, a day of fasting and prayer, all vows, all promises we have made to ourselves in this last year; all commitments to unswerving thought, opinion and behaviour are cancelled, nullified and made nought. Now we are free to re-examine all of our motivations and desires, and all the roads we have chosen to walk, without critique. It is a day we have been given freedom to choose to be human again, even in this world where nations refuse sanctuary to the refugee, the poor are ignored and even scorned; where our environment is exploited and destroyed. On Yom Kippur we are called to look at how we may live our lives in the year to come. We consider our answer to Rabbi Hillel’s question: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?

In preparation for Yom Kippur some Jews perform a ceremonial sacrifice called kaparat. It involves holding a rooster in one hand and the prayer book in the other while reciting this text, “this is my exchange, this is in my stead, this is my atonement.” The rooster is then slaughtered in a kosher manner and given to the poor for their feast held that day before fasting on Yom Kippur.

A story that may not be true, but still is, much like a fantasy novel can be, is told of this atonement ritual.

Once, on the evening before Yom Kippur, one of the followers of Rabbi Elimelech asked to see how he, Rabbi Elimelech, observed the custom of kaparat. They compared methods and other than the colour of the rooster they did it just the same, but still the disciple wanted to see his rabbi do it.

“You want to see an extraordinary kaparat?” asked Rabbi Elimelech. “Go observe how Moshe the tavern-keeper does kaparat. Now, there you’ll see something far more inspiring than my own, ordinary kaparat.”

The disciple located Moshe’s tavern at a crossroads several miles outside of town and asked to stay the night. “I’m sorry,” said the tavern-keeper. “As you see, this is a small establishment, and we don’t have any rooms to let. There’s an inn a small distance further down the road.”

“Please,” begged the disciple, “I’ve been traveling all day, and I want to rest awhile. I don’t need a room – I’ll just curl up in a corner for a few hours and be on my way.”

“O.K.,” said Moshe. “We’ll be closing up shortly, and then you can

get some sleep.”

After much shouting, cajoling and threatening, Moshe succeeded in herding his clientele of drunken peasants out the door. The chairs and tables were stacked in a corner, and the room, which also served as the tavern-keeper’s living quarters, readied for the night. Midnight had long passed, and the hour of kaparot was approaching. The disciple, wrapped in his blanket under a table, feigned sleep, but kept watch in the darkened room, determined not to miss anything.

Before dawn, Moshe rose from his bed, washed his hands and recited the morning blessings. “Time for kaparot!” he called quietly to his wife, taking care not to wake his guest. “Yentel, please bring me the notebook – it’s on the shelf above the cupboard.”

Moshe sat himself on a small stool, lit a candle, and began reading from the notebook, unaware that his “sleeping” guest was wide awake and straining to hear every word. The notebook was a diary of all the misdeeds and transgressions the tavern-keeper had committed in the course of the year, the date, time and circumstance of each scrupulously noted. His “sins” were quite benign – a word of gossip one day, oversleeping the time for prayer on another, neglecting to give his daily coin to charity on a third – but by the time Moshe had read through the first few pages, his face was bathed in tears. For more than an hour Moshe read and wept, until the last page had been turned.

“Yentel,” he now called to his wife, “bring me the second notebook.”

This, too, was a diary – of all the troubles and misfortunes that had befallen him in the course of the year. On this day Moshe was beaten by a gang of peasants, on that day his child fell ill; once, in the dead of winter, the family had frozen for several nights for lack of firewood; another time their cow had died, and there was no milk until enough money had been saved to buy another.

When he had finished reading the second notebook, the tavern-keeper lifted his eyes heavenward and said: “So you see, dear Father in Heaven, I have sinned against You. Last year I repented and promised to fulfil Your commandments, but I repeatedly succumbed to my evil inclination. But last year I also prayed and begged You for a year of health and prosperity, and I trusted in You that it would indeed be this way.

Dear Father, today is the eve of Yom Kippur, when everyone forgives and is forgiven. Let us put the past behind us. I’ll accept my troubles as atonement for my sins, and You, in Your great mercy, shall do the same.”

Moshe took the two notebooks in his hands, raised them aloft, circled them three times above his head, and said: "This is my exchange, this is in my stead, this is my atonement." He then threw them into the fireplace, where the smouldering coals soon turned the tear-stained pages to ashes.

This is how Moshe found shalom. This is how Moshe was able to stay on the unknowable path to become all he might become. To do likewise simply requires spending some time being honest with ourselves, which is not the same as beating up on ourselves. We are doing the latter if we cannot see that we are each an awesome vessel capable of great love. Don't worry about the cracks caused by former missteps or being knocked around some by life. To be a player is to see the light coming through those cracks. It allows us to forgive and be forgiven. It gives us the strength to not let the past define our future. Taking the time to make our atonement keeps us on the path wherever it leads.