

Lillian and Ben-Zion, Teshuvah and Tears

Teshuvah: a turning, to move from here to There

We went to visit Ben-Zion's home in New York City. This time, Susan, and my two daughters, Sarika and Adina, accompanied me. And Todd, Ben-Zion's friend and chronicler. It was Todd who opened the door to the story of Ben-Zion and invited me to enter.

I was delighted to tell Lillian, Ben-Zion's wife, that the article that I had written about Ben-Zion had been accepted for publication.

"You must send me a copy of the article," she said; I promised I would. "I will give you a copy of my manuscript before you leave. It's my interpretation of Ben-Zion's work."

Now I had been officially drawn into Lillian's circle: Lillian, Todd, myself, a conventicle of devotees bound by some deep Kabbalah of connection to the vision of Ben-Zion. She went into one of her bureaus and pulled out a handwritten manuscript, in two volumes, entitled "Reflections on the Works of Ben-Zion."

"I made the cover out of a coat that Ben-Zion wore," Lillian said. Inside the originals were photos and color reproductions of the works of Ben-Zion and a handwritten text. She had assembled the entire piece out of these color reproductions and her hand-written commentary.

"This is the original," she said, "I want you to have a copy." She gave me a copy of the two volumes of the text in a black cover bound by red thread that she had knotted and tied by the four small holes punched into the paper.

I received the treasures and my wife stuffed it into her bag. I wanted to cradle the pages, hold them on the ride home, refer to them at the stops along the way to assure myself that she had added something to what I had imagined of the work of Ben-Zion, the profound implications of his work explicated in poetry and song and verse within, not discourse, not academic, not the familiar but the intuitive whole, the inner world of Ben-Zion's work articulated by his wife, his companion of half a century, I wondered just how she would speak the inner life of the vision of Ben-Zion.

She had not actually spoken of the particulars of Ben-Zion's work or his visionary qualities since I had met her. I assumed that she could, that we shared that secret knowledge, that all the aspects of his work that drew me into his circle

were too familiar to her to mention, but it was understood between us, it was, wasn't it?

I admit that before I opened the hand-written pages and read from them, I thought perhaps I was assuming too much. I could have been wrong. Maybe she knew it but could not write it. I have seen this: to know and not be capable of writing. To know it and to write it are not always the same thing, though they are to me.

Her text was beautifully clear and well organized. It was the story of Ben-Zion's process as well as his product, a description of his work environment -- his studio, his home -- and the objects that were present there that represented aspects of his art.

"You know, these things. . ." she gestured around her to the collectibles, the artifacts, the figurines, the rocks, the crystals, the iron implements, "they were not possessions to Ben-Zion. Ben-Zion was not a person of possessions, nothing possessed him, they were objects that he loved and he learned from. But they were not possessions. I don't believe that Ben-Zion ever possessed anything. He learned from them."

### The Legend of the Thirty Six

Back at Todd's apartment, where Washington Irving once lived and where, on an occasional visit to New York City, Oscar Wilde used to stay, Todd pulled out a file with a stack of photographs that he was preparing for a show that would open up in Michigan in November. There were thirty-six photographs.

Todd created the show around the legend of the thirty-six. Todd knew the legend, but not the details. He knew that in every generation, there were thirty-six righteous individuals, anonymous, whose presence in the world sustained the generation. That is about all he knew: there are thirty-six, they are anonymous, secret even, they are the soul of the generation, for their sake is the world sustained.

There was not a single human figure in Todd's photographs, but in each picture was the intimation, the hint of a form, a face, a figure, a human form hidden somewhere in the photograph, the way a face appears in the clouds, a body in the gnarled wood of an old tree, eyes in the swirl of oil on a sidewalk. All of the pictures were taken in Eastern Europe, many at the sites of the camps.

I promised Todd I would attend the opening, and offered to play music while people looked at the photographs. We all went off to Italy for a month where I sat on a mountain in an eleventh century town and wrote stories. I worked up a piece of music to play on the lute to accompany Todd's exhibition. The story of the thirty-six tugged at me the entire time I was in Umbria.

We stayed at the house of an artist in an eleventh century town with a wall around it. The first night we arrived, I found a book of the artist's paintings, published in Italy, in the apartment. It was a beautiful book.

There are few figures in the paintings, and if there are, they are seen from a distance, shadowy, undefined. The paintings are mostly natural scenes with careful placement of objects, chairs, trees, houses, barns, in lonely isolation, or landscapes, in the western style but reminiscent of Oriental landscapes, lively worlds of plants, trees, skies, mountains, colors the way they appear when seen gazing from a balcony towards a mountain in Umbria.

The artist works on the third floor of his home, in the same room where he sleeps and has a writing desk. On the wall, he tacks up the etching he is working on, and there is a story also tacked there, about the artist written by a guest who honeymooned next door with his new wife.

The story is handwritten. I read the first page of the story. It imagined the artist as a painter who became successful and tried to recapture the relation of artist and audience by selling his paintings under another name, or anonymously, at street fairs without a signature at all. In the story, the artist was searching for his audience again, who loved his work independently of the name inscribed on it. I only read the first page.

Is this what he was doing? I don't know but there was something basic, simple about his walk through the world, the way we stepped over flat rocks to find a small waterfall, the cascatella, near his home, where it is *divieto di pesca* (forbidden to fish), the way we sat on the rocks and listened to the sound of the water, the way we talked above the din of the waterfall, the way we laid back upon a large rock and gazed up at the sky, and the sky itself.

It wouldn't be hard to imagine, at first, that the artist was on a journey of secret destinations, seeking a lost audience, from the way we looked into the cloudy muddiness of the water, speaking of the rain that stirred up the mud, and the mud itself.

But, I don't think so.

He enjoys being an artist, and the revolutionary sense of making his living creating art. He also has a sense of humor about it. He especially enjoys being an artist in Italy; he has cultivated the character of emigre artist but he also has a sense of humor about that. He often declined excursions with us because he was acting like an artist and creating something enduring for the next century. Still, I understood that he enjoyed being a relatively well known person in this little town; many of the local people had prints of his paintings, or posters of one of his shows, as did the local post office which it displayed, often underneath the postal notifications, on one of its walls. The artist had also developed the Italian esthetic, the attention to the details of everyday life -- food, furniture, ceramics, wine, that kind of thing -- that is prized in Italy.

His home was filled with good books, classics, not casual reading, but the serious reading of an educated person who reads not only for pleasure. He also read about Gertrude Stein and her circle of artist friends in Paris of the Twenties, placing himself, I imagine, in that category of artists who do their work in a country other than their own. Though he did not speak like an intellectual, I mean he did not speak about ideas, he spoke about beauty often.

He came from Oklahoma, and he had a loyalty to his roots there, though he satirized where he came from, the way people think, how they speak. I felt both a loyalty and a rejection of his background; some of the stories he told placed him outside his own circles, in other stories, it was clear where he came from.

In the apartment we rented, there were several shelves of books about movie stars of bygone eras. I wondered about these books; they turned up in a story he told me soon after we arrived.

There was a street cleaner, who swept up with a broom of large leaves bound together and a push cart. He was dark and handsome, a young man, who glanced at me when I passed him by but was careful not to engage me with his eyes. I asked the artist about him.

"Yes, he said, he's very bright. Speaks fluent English. He never goes into the piazza unless he's working. He keeps to himself, keeps his head down but does his work seriously. I say buon giorno to him, and one day he calls me over. Excuse me, he says, do you have any books about Rudolph Valentino? Rudolph Valentino? Yes, Rudolph Valentino, my girlfriend says I look like him. I had a book about Rudolph Valentino so I gave it to him. I asked him how it is that he became a street cleaner. Mmmm, he said, and after a thoughtful pause, no self esteem. Dysfunctional famiglia."

When we first arrived, the artist invited us to a puppet show at the home of an English painter and his writer wife not far from where we were staying. They bought a villa; it was actually the villa of two brothers. There were two buildings, not five feet from each other, to preserve, I suppose, some sort of separation.

The couple who bought the villa were enclosing the two separate buildings with a connecting floor. It was a beautiful setting, lovely views, nice lawns, four or five floors straight up and down, each floor seemed to have virtually the same layout of rooms. The artist painted on the top floor.

The kitchen was well appointed and the rest of the villa was waiting to be restored. In one of the rooms, was a velvet chaise with an open copy of Joyce's Ulysses on it.

In the English painter's studio on the top floor were some old boots that may have been placed in a specific arrangement on the floor; I bumped into them, straightened them the way they were. Or they may have been an old pair of boots that someone kicked off in the middle of the floor.

The puppet show was a version of Little Red Riding Hood, designed and performed by an English circus performer, a friend of the owners of the Villa, who had lived for eight years in our home town in the United States of America. We knew some of the same people.

In this version of Little Red Riding Hood, everyone got killed, the sound was poor, the stage makeshift, but the puppets were quite nice. The puppeteer came out at the end with a humanoid figure attached to his arms and feet in the skeletal image of Death, miming Frank Sinatra's "Come Fly With Me" that played on the sound system while he moved through the audience. It was the most effective part of the performance.

The artist was the voice of Miss Red. "He chose me for the voice of Miss Red," the artist said, "he heard something sweet and dark -- something sinister -- in my voice, as if I had killed someone." But his voice is not at all sinister; it is evanescent, like the wind.

After the puppet show, we stood out on the front lawn, there were children playing boce, and several of the English were goofing with the artist and the long lens on his camera that he had slung around his neck that hung down below his waist. They were making priapic jokes, with accompanying genital commentary, what a big thing he has, one fellow cleaning the lens off with his

breath with great drama, all in front of the children, but I was the only one watching.

There was a young man from England I spoke with who was introducing a short film on schizophrenia among African males in England that the British government had commissioned him to make. It was to follow the film that night in the film festival in the town where we were staying. He didn't seem to know much about schizophrenia, but he had created a dance, a ballet, that morning in the yard out in front of the villa. His name was Rodriguez, and I saw him later at the film festival, his name was on the program, but I couldn't stay up long enough to catch his show.

I was also told that the woman who lives in the villa is a well known novelist, that she has three children, some of whom were present, from three different men, one a Brazilian nobleman who she married when she was sixteen.

I saw one of the men making the priapic jokes at the worst restaurant we ate it in Italy several weeks later, in Umbertide, but he didn't recognize me.

Occasionally the painter told us a story that was tender, occasionally salacious. Of the latter stories, he said "all these stories end up with my clothes off." Of the tender stories, there was a softness, sometimes even weeping in his eyes when he told them.

One night he told us about he and his girlfriend looking for a village in the mountains near Assisi. I wasn't sure which category of story we were in; it could have gone either way, erupt into holiness or with his clothes off. He and an Italian girlfriend were lost on a mountain road, the other side of Assisi; they saw an old man walking with a stick. "An old peasant man," the painter described him. "We asked him where Assisi was, oh. . . he said, you mean citta di San Francesco, the city of St. Francis, that's how he knew it, how beautiful is that, the city of San Francesco. . .we wept for a while and continued on our way."

It was the weeping of course that attracted me to this story. When I returned home, I began to wonder why if I told such a story, I wasn't weeping through life myself. Neither my life or my art had brought me to such a weeping, though I loved the story, wrote it and told it several times. Then, two months after my return, on a Friday night while playing music with one of my new co-players, I began to weep, quietly and inwardly. There was no before or after in the story of St. Francis and my quiet weeping, just two stories, symbiotic.

I wrote a half a dozen stories while we were in Italy, all the time thinking about the subject of the thirty-six and feeling eager to get back, do a little research, and wondering where the music and the stories were going to take me.

When I got home, I went to the Talmud, read the section where the thirty-six appears, and wrote the following version of the legend of the thirty-six for the literature accompanying the show and sent it to Todd:

### The Thirty Six are Hidden

“There are not less than 36 *tzaddikim*/righteous persons in the world who receive the *Shekhinah*/the Divine Presence” – B.T. Sanhedrin 97b, Sukkot 45b

The notion of the thirty six righteous ones appears in the Talmud, the oral tradition of Judaism, as a teaching of one of the early Babylonian rabbis, Abbaye. In Abbaye’s teaching, the world required a minimum of thirty-six righteous individuals in order to exist. The idea may have been suggested by the famous story in the Bible of Sodom, in which Abraham argued with God to save the wicked city (Genesis, chapter 18). God agreed, if ten righteous individuals could be found there. Abraham won the argument but lost the fight; Sodom was destroyed, seemingly because the minimum, ten righteous individuals, could not be found.

That’s the shadow side of the story of the thirty-six: it’s a minimum, and sometimes the world may not contain thirty six righteous individuals.

In later Kabbalistic folklore, the thirty-six hidden ones have the potential to save the world, they appear when they are needed, and one of them might be the Messiah. They come at times of great peril, called out of their anonymity and humility by the necessity to save the world. Because they can, and because we need them.

We Jews began to get familiar with them, referring to them in Yiddish as the “lamed-vov-niks” (lamed vov is Hebrew shorthand for thirty-six), and seeing them everywhere in the anonymous acts of good people who rise to greatness in difficult circumstances. And because one of the lamed vov-niks, one of the anonymous thirty-six might be the Messiah, we tended to treat strangers with kindness and the possibility that he or she could be the one.

It could be the person we least suspect, because the thirty-six, like all the sustaining notions of the world in the Kabbalah, are hidden. They may appear, they may not appear. In each generation, we look for them everywhere.

And this Poem:

The Thirty-Six are Hidden

“There are not less than 36 righteous persons in the world who receive the Divine Presence” – B.T. Sanhedrin 97b, Sukkot 45b

They may come to the door they may not  
They may sit alone outside of the ball park  
Selling pencils  
They may not speak until spoken to,

They may not know who they are  
They may not emerge  
Until they are needed,

We need them now.

In one generation  
Everyone knew it.

Every once in a while  
Since, in a story  
Told about one of the anonymous  
Thirty-six,  
Alive or dead  
The spirit of the thirty six returned

And the world was sustained.

As if the world deserved its thirty-six  
As if the world earned its hiddenness  
As if the world deserved to be saved,

As if it only takes thirty-six,

As if there may come a generation,  
Or there was,  
In which there was not.

What I was trying to make sense through this entire chapter of the story was the relation between the legend of the thirty-six, the notion of *teshuvah*, the existence of the world, Lillian, Todd, myself, and the telling of the tale.

I asked during my teaching preceding the days of Awe, this year, 5760, if anyone could help me, if anyone could supply the connection for me, what is it I asked? I even wrote it down and asked it in the course of the texts I produced, wondering if anyone knew.

What brought me to this was the argument in the Talmud between the two Babylonians, Rav and Shmuel: was *teshuvah* necessary to the redemption of the world, or was it enough to mourn?

To my surprise, perhaps I knew but I had forgotten, the legend of the thirty-six precedes, just precedes, the argument of Rav and Shmuel. In my mind, I went searching for two entirely different subjects in the Talmud and they were placed next to one another. It was so unlikely. Maybe I had known, but if I did, I had forgotten. I was completely surprised by what I found as I dove into the text. I went swimming in the sea of the Talmud and bumped into someone I knew. I learned, again, that for Shmuel, suffering is enough for redemption.

About the thirty-six, about *teshuvah*, neither of them will save the world. Not the thirty-six, because it's a minimum of thirty-six according to the Talmud, the implication being that there may come a generation, there may have been, in which there are not thirty-six. I started to weep, the thought of a world without thirty-six righteous persons was inexorably sad to me.

I knew, in my blood in my bones, that I had been born into a generation in which there were not thirty-six. I knew this from the stories that my parents hid from me. I wept over the Talmud the day I read the text, three days prior to the holiday.

There was a letter in the newspaper quoting a great light of a previous generation. When asked why the holocaust, the precious Lubavitcher Rebbe put his head down on his desk and cried.

*Teshuvah*, too, will not save us. I understood, like Shmuel, that the world will not be saved by this, by that, and what to do is to be in your suffering. Those are actually the words from the Talmud: to stand with your mourning. It sounds so contemporary.

I don't know how the world is to be saved, unless it is to repair it with tears. To weep the world well.

I recalled Daniel in Italy and the stories that he occasionally told, the ones especially that were tender. Of the tender stories, there was a softness, sometimes even weeping in his eyes when he told them.

I was talking with J. on Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat of *teshuvah* transformation between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He was telling me about a friend of his son who had died in a car accident. "I was in New Jersey with a big client," J. said. "I live for this stuff, but I didn't want to be there."

"You don't live for this stuff," I said, "not for this, not for that, but for everything that issues from the mouth of God."

"My heart hurts," J. said.

"You're saving the world," I said, "you're saving the world with your tears."

It was the weeping of course that attracted me to these stories. When I returned home, I began to wonder why if I told such a story, where were my tears? Then, two months after my return, while playing music with one of my friends, I began to weep, quietly and inwardly.

I realized, too, that the weeping was the center of the story in the Talmud, and the connection between the legend of the thirty-six and *teshuvah*. The world would not be saved in the common, obvious ways; it may not be saved even by the righteous, there may be too few of them, nor by the sincere acts of repentance. It would only be saved by our tears.

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