

Dark Moss

THE REPAIR OF THE PAST

Resh Lakish said, great is *teshuvah* (repentance), because it reduces one's deliberate sins to mere errors. But did not Resh Lakish say at another time, great is *teshuvah*, because it transforms one's deliberate sins into merits? – Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 86b

I was present, once, for the repair of the past. It happened the day Todd introduced me to Thomas. Thomas had come to Jerusalem from Germany to say the *Kaddish* [memorial prayer], on behalf of his father, for his grandfather. His grandfather had come to Israel from Berlin in 1932, lost track of his family left behind in Germany, and Thomas's father and grandfather never found each other again. Thomas's father had spent eleven years in Buchenwald, arrested as a Communist and kept as a Jew. He survived the War and became an official in the East German Communist Party. He married a German woman and raised three sons, the youngest Thomas. After Thomas's grandfather and father both died, Thomas recovered his identity as a Jew living in Berlin about the time the Berlin Wall came down. He taught himself a little Hebrew and came to Israel in search of the Israeli remnant of his family. His grandfather had married a second wife in Israel, on a journey of secret destinations. I met Thomas the day he came to Jerusalem.

Would you like to meet Thomas? Todd asked me. He wants to go to the Wall [the western wall of the Temple]. Todd set up a meeting in the Old City, inside the Jaffa Gate.

We met Thomas early in the afternoon, just inside the Jaffa Gate. He was thin, fair-skinned, carrying a camera around his neck, his fatigue jacket full of film and other camera paraphernalia. We sat in a café, introduced each other, drank a dark sweet coffee, then we walked through the Armenian Quarter to the Wall.

The three of us arrived at the Wall mid-afternoon, three o'clock. There were only a few supplicants working the Wall that day, so we had most of the space on the men's side to ourselves.

We stood in a huddle, Thomas, Todd, and I, our arms around each other, three men from half a world apart drawn together probably for the only time in our lives to perform a ritual that emerged spontaneously. Todd pulled out of his pocket a piece of barbed wire that he had picked up off the ground at Auschwitz

and carried with him for a purpose that had clarified only that moment. He gave it to Thomas.

We talked about holiness and broken hearts. Thomas asked quietly, "Is there something that cannot be lifted to holiness? Can anything be raised to holiness?"

"Almost everything," I imagined.

He was holding the piece of barbed wire in his hands as if he were asking permission to place it, among the other messages, in the Wall. Visitors to the Wall place messages in its ancient crevices, messages to God, called *kvitttelech*. Thomas placed the piece of barbed wire in the Wall.

He then placed his hands and his forehead against the Wall and we said the *Kaddish* [memorial] prayer together. I watched him speaking the words of the *Kaddish* and as I watched this is what I saw:

Birds. There are two kinds of birds that I saw flying around the Wall, swifts (Hebrew: *sisim*) and palm doves. When Thomas put his forehead against the Wall and began to speak the *Kaddish*, the swifts whipped around wildly. I noticed no difference in the doves, they were nesting quietly in the Wall, but the swifts went screeching and careening madly for the minute or so it took Thomas to slowly pronounce the words of the memorial prayer, which he had taught himself for just this occasion.

Something in Thomas's prayer disturbed the atmosphere on that day, and the swifts, who have accompanied two millenia of *Kaddish* prayers at the Western Wall, sensed the interruption. Since the destruction of the Temple of which this was the Western Wall of the outer barrier, since the year 70 the swifts have accompanied generations of *Kaddish* prayers at that very spot, or so I thought, until I told the story to Miri who lives in Jerusalem.

When I told her about the swifts, she said to me, "The swifts are very special, but they were not always here. They returned to the Wall when the Jews returned. I know an Arab in the Old City who told me that before the Jews came back in '67, there were no swifts here. The swifts returned to the Wall with the Jews."

We are taught that the soul of the *Shekhinah*, the indwelling spirit of God, rests in a bird at the Western Wall. I quoted that teaching to Miri. "Would that it were so simple," sighed Miri. "Whose God? Which wall?"

In the Zohar, the classical text of Jewish mysticism, there is a notion that the ultimate test of Abraham is a test both of Abraham and his son, both his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, to teach Abraham something that was missing in his own generation that could be reconciled only through his sons, and the descendants of his sons. There was something disturbed, broken in Abraham's generation that would only be repaired in the future, through his children, through Isaac and Ishmael, and the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael. All peacemaking has profound implications not only for the present, and the future, but for the past.

I looked at Thomas and I witnessed a healing moving through him into the past, healing something broken in his father, and healing something broken in his grandfather, something that could only be repaired by Thomas. I felt Thomas's prayer healing something in his past that the personalities themselves could not heal, closing the circles.

I understood how history could be healed, how a person's act of sacred intent in the present could transform past deeds. I saw it. I saw it through Thomas's act of healing, moving back through his family to repair something that had been broken generations ago.

We spent some time in silence at the Wall, the three of us, then we each wandered our way out, Thomas returning to Tel Aviv, then Germany, Todd back to where he was staying in Jerusalem, myself to our apartment in an old Arab neighborhood near the industrial part of South Jerusalem.

I hadn't forgotten about the swifts, but this was Jerusalem, the extraordinary sometimes so ordinary, the land, the birds, the stones full of significance and deep story.

On the way home, I walked through the Armenian Quarter and through the passageway by the outer wall of the Bishop Gobat School, down the side of Mt. Zion, through the Valley of Hinnom, and up Emek Refaim, the Valley of Healing, towards our apartment. On the way down the side of Mt. Zion, I looked at the rocks along the path that I have walked hundreds of times. Many of these rocks have been unearthed and are the same rocks that boundaried the Mount of Zion in Second Temple times. We have been going up to Zion this way for three thousand years.

At first, it seemed as if a dark stain had spread over the face of the rocks, like the leprous house in Leviticus, a dark stain that appeared on the rocks. I looked closer and saw that the dark stain was actually a moss, a dark moss, I looked closely, it wasn't easy to recognize but that's what it was, moss. There

were also flowers in the crevices of the rocks, and wild grass, and this growth I had never noticed before, dark moss.

I wondered if my ancestors, pilgrims going up to Zion, had stopped at that same place to look at the dark moss. I wondered whether the dark moss had grown along with the rocks, for these thousands of years, or whether it was recent, since the destruction of the Second Temple, two thousand years ago, or since medieval times, or since the sixteenth century when we came down from the north to visit Jerusalem, or whether it was modern, since the founding of the state, since the air has been cloudied by the exhaust of machines, or whether it was a spiritual sign, like the leprosy that grew on the walls of houses, a sign of something that is growing, something that can be tended, something changing into something else, the moss darkened by uncertainty, fear, anger, something unrepaired, or perhaps the blood that has been spilled all around had dried on the natural green, dried dark, so dark that you didn't notice it, you hardly knew that there was something growing there, but there is, there is something growing there.

I saw it.

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