

Thoughts on Possibility (Zohar 1:133)

The stranger comes upon R. Shimon and R. Abba on the road towards Teveria. The stranger tells the companions that he is searching for R. Shimon. The dialogue begins. The discussion surrounds the three times of institutional prayer, the archetypal forefathers whose lives embodied the prayers, and the divine traits that each prayer represents. The brightness of morning and the grace of Abraham, the darkening dusk and the severity of Issac, the depths of night and the compassion of Jacob.

R. Shimon opens and speaks: While the traits of Abraham and Issac are essential, they remain caught up in their specificity. They occupy the sides- both right and left- the peripheral that marks the edges of experience. Unchanging and constant, the grace of Abraham and the severity of Issac become the margins that keep the middle open. Jacob, a composite of his father and grandfather, embodies the middle path of compassion, the dialogue between open and closed, between light and dark. In occupying the middle space that makes room for both extremes, the centrality of Jacob is described as the “choicest” of the pillars.

The stranger, now following the companions on the path towards Teveria, opens and speaks: If Jacob is the “choicest”, the paradigm of sacred neutrality, then why does his prayer-time remain optional (reshut) while the others carry the weight of obligation (chovah)?

R. Shimon responds: this has already been discussed, however, but, aval, there is more that can be said. The two moments of Abraham and Isaac, the brightness of morning and the darkening of dusk, these times are present to make room for the middle that they shape. The dance of grace and severity open unto the space of compassion. They dance for the sole purpose of compassion, “however, come and see, these two times of the two prayers are there for the sole purpose of cleaving to the act of Jacob”.

Like the beloved embraced within the arms of the lover, there is no need for anything more. The right arm of Abraham and the left arm of Isaac embrace the possibility of Jacob, forming the potential space for compassion. Embraced, loved, there is no need for consummation. No need for specific ending. Protected by the two sides of certainty, of obligation, the event that murmurs in the center, the now, need not, must not be concretized into the stability of the absolute. The “optional”, cut through with the anxiety of the “perhaps”, of the happenstance encounter in the heart of the night, must remain perpetually open. Only

through the volitional act is the neutral possibility of decision possible. Devoid of the compulsory drive that is written in obligation, the end, the purpose, the centrality of the center must remain free within the hollowed space of obligations embrace.

R. Shimon continues: the embrace, the folding of the left into the right and the right into the left is necessary. The margins are stable and announced. The middle, the event, the compassionate, this remains whispered, hidden and concealed in the openness of possibility.

R. Abba cries out, kissing the hand of R. Shimon:

This secret has yet to be revealed.