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University Public Worship

Admit Weekend
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The Holy Afterglow
(Exodus 33:1-23; Psalm 121)

For those prospective students who are imagining yourselves at Stanford as you walk through the sandstone and arches, I wish you a warm welcome and a hearty *mazal tov* for having reached this joyous moment. If you are still deliberating whether this is the school where you would like to engage your curiosity, enthusiasm and wonder, perhaps an hour in this church will convey that Stanford is a place of spirit as well as intellect, feeding your soul as well as your mind and body.

So here we are, right in the thick of it, at the heart of the Stanford. We are surrounded by engineering, and religious studies, by the psychology building and the library. And look what's right in the middle of it all?

What did Jane Stanford intend when she built a church in the center of the University? What is the relationship between the quest for knowledge embodied in the University and the quest for God symbolized by a Church?

From our ProFros to our graduate students and senior scholars, Stanford University is filled with people seeking knowledge, seeking an education. Within this beautifully landscaped, tree-lined campus are many people on the move. People here want to know more, do more, excel more. If only I finish my dissertation, ...If only I write this paper... If only I publish this next book...If only he would marry me...If only I had more time. If

only...then I would be fulfilled. Then I would find contentment. Then I would be happy.
Then I could relax!

Maybe Jane Stanford placed a church in the center of the University to complement the intellectual quest with another quest. Maybe, among high achievers with equally high expectations of ourselves is a desire to know not only what, but why. Not only how, but Who.

The person most likely to succeed at Stanford from the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, was Moses. Moses was a shepherd. He was a leader. He was a judge. He was a trailblazer. In Jewish tradition, Moses is consistently referred to as Moshe Rabenu, which means Moses, our teacher. If there were ever a person whose accomplishments could make him rest easy, it would be Moses. Yet, like any fine student, Moses remains a seeker, thirsting for knowledge, thirsting for understanding.

Moses had many accomplishments. Moses was the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt. Before that, Moses sought God's name at the burning bush. Then he learned to stand up to Pharaoh and defend his people. While in the wilderness, seeking the Promised Land, Moses climbed Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments. Through all these accomplishments, Moses thirsts to know more. What a great student!

After entreating God on behalf of the children of Israel for making the Golden Calf, Moses still yearns for a greater understanding of God. Moses pleads, "*Hareni na et kvodecha*", which means "Let me behold Your Presence"

God listens to Moses' need to have a fuller understanding of the Holy One. However, like many good listeners, God does not fully satisfy Moses' request. Moses does not get to behold God's Presence. He only gets to see the back of God. As God passes by, Moses gets to see God's Afterglow.

As we read in Exodus, "And God answered, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Adonai, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But you cannot see My face, for no human can see me and live! Adonai said, "here is a place next to me; station yourself on the rock, and it shall be: when my Presence passes by, I will place you in the cleft of the rock and screen you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand; you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."(Ex. 33:19-23)

God says, "You shall see my back." So what does Moses actually see? Does Moses see the back of God like a poster from an advertising campaign? Does God have a face and a back? The Hebrew word, *achurai*, which is often translated "back," also has a temporal meaning. It refers to time passing. "And it came to pass after these things." uses the same Hebrew root. Moses saw traces of God's presence. Moses saw God's afterglow. Just as we sense the presence of someone who wears perfume even after she leaves the room, so Moses senses God's presence after God passes by. Moses knows what it is like just after God has been there.

Or, in the words of an eighteenth century Hungarian rabbi and legal scholar, the Chatam Sofer, “A period of time can only be understood once we are able to view the entire context of events and happenings. In the same way, we are only able to understand God’s ways and recognize how God works in the world in retrospect. Only then is it possible to fathom even a little of what God does...This is the real meaning of “You will see My back.”

How often have we read a book or taken a course whose meaning only becomes apparent in retrospect? How often have we run into a friend who is interested in a new job just after we had a conversation with someone looking for an employee with exactly her qualifications?

As an anonymous poem says,

“Ten years ago...
I turned my face for a moment
and it became my life.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner tells a story about recognizing God’s works in the world when they are written on a text resting on your table.

“It was the Sabbath morning when we read of how Abraham sent his servant Eliezer, to find a wife for his son Isaac. About fifty people had gathered around a big table an hour and a half before services and the week’s bar mitzvah for bagels, coffee and one another’s insights into the deeper meanings of the biblical text.

...Seated across from me was a young Harvard trained physician, fluent in Chinese, with a degree in acupuncture from Beijing. A new member of the congregation, he had been coming to services every month or so...Also at the table was one of my favorite former rabbinic students who, when she was free on Saturday mornings, would attend the congregation.

The group was scheduled to continue for another half hour, but I had to meet with the bar mitzvah family before services began. I...quietly set out to leave the room. But as I was about to open the door to leave, something came over me. I walked back into the middle of the discussion. It was not easy to do this inconspicuously in a crowd of fifty people. All heads followed my path. I leaned down and whispered into the startled doctor's ear. "Don't look now, but the young woman seated across from you in the gray dress is a rabbi. She is unmarried."

I didn't wait for a response. I just turned around and went to meet with the bar mitzvah family.

At the end of the week, I got a bouquet of flowers from the couple. A few months later, I did the wedding." They have just celebrated the birth of their third child."

The Chatam Sofer teaches, "We are only able to understand God's ways and recognize how God works in the world in retrospect...This is the real meaning of "You will see my back."

In the Genesis text they were studying that week, Eliezer asked God for a sign that he would find the right woman for Isaac. He wanted to be an emissary for a “match made in heaven.” Was Rabbi Kushner just a particularly intuitive and sensitive person, or could it be that the very reading of Eliezer’s request served as a sign that this match too was a “match made in heaven?”

Sometimes the window to a world beyond is sensible to us only in an inchoate, unarticulated feeling. God’s Presence may not have been revealed in this moment, but God’s Afterglow certainly was. Here, the Holy Afterglow was present as a rabbi in a study session on finding a wife, glimmers a marriage as yet unknown by the potential partners. Yiddish has a word for such a moment. It is “*bashert*”, destined, it was meant to be. God’s afterglow is found here.

God’s Afterglow does not come only in moments of love and marriage. Today is Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and so I think of such a moment in the context of war, dehumanization and destruction. In Munich, in Nazi Germany, a woman was riding a city bus home from work when SS storm troopers suddenly stopped the coach and began examining the identification papers of the passengers. Most were annoyed, but a few were terrified. Jews were being told to leave the bus and get into a truck around the corner.

The woman watched from her seat in the rear as the soldiers systematically worked their way down the aisle. She began to tremble, tears streaming down her face. When the man next to her noticed that she was crying, he politely asked her why.

“I don’t have the papers you have. I am a Jew. They’re going to take me.”

The man exploded with disgust. He began to curse and scream at her. “You stupid bitch,” he roared, “I can’t stand being near you!”

The SS men asked what all the yelling was about.

“Damn her,” the man shouted angrily. “My wife has forgotten her papers again! I’m so fed up. She always does this!”

The soldiers laughed and moved on.

The woman never saw the man again. She never even knew his name.

God’s Afterglow is found in the creative thinking and quick acting of a stranger who saved a life and continued on with his; unacknowledged, unsung, but nonetheless, reminding us of the mystery of God’s ways. There are moments of potential change, of enormous importance whose implications we see only in retrospect. We do not always know when we have arrived at a crossroads. We cannot see God’s face. We cannot know God’s ways. But we can see God’s afterglow. We can follow the traces of God.

And sometimes the Holy Afterglow takes years, decades to be seen. So it was fifteen years ago when a woman named Vivian Malone Jones received an award in Alabama for her

contributions to the community. Such events happen regularly, with little fanfare, and often less sense of the Divine at work. But this award struck me as momentous. For the giver of the award was former Alabama Governor George Wallace, and Vivian Malone Jones was one of the young black women whose entrance to the University of Alabama, he had, decades earlier blocked the doors to prevent. At the time, George Wallace was weak and sick with Parkinson's Disease, unable to speak and rarely seen in public. But he insisted on coming to this event and through his son, he asked for forgiveness for his racism from Vivian Malone Jones. She accepted his outreached hand, the very hand that had tried to deny her quest for knowledge. This was a moment of reconciliation and redemption. This was a moment of forgiveness and connection. Forgiveness is a place where God's afterglow is palpable. "You cannot see my face, I will place you in the cleft of the rock...and you can see my back."

In love, in heroism, in forgiveness, the Holy Afterglow lingers. In the many acts of connectedness between strangers, friends and family, in the moments of awareness of something beyond ourselves, we can know God's afterglow. God's Afterglow may be sensed in the loving hug of one who comforts a mourner. God's Afterglow may be in the gentle touch of a nurse caring for an ill patient. God's Afterglow can be found in a prayer for one in need, in the momentary flicker in a beloved's eye, in the grasp of a baby's small hand. If we, like Moses ask, "Let me behold Your Presence," if we acknowledge our thirst to know God, we might recognize those times, potentially momentous, potentially quiet, when God has been in our presence.

Perhaps Jane Stanford built Memorial Church in the center of Stanford University because here we not only seek knowledge, but we seek connection. We, like Moses, are thirsting to know God's Presence. Our yearning is an invitation to find ourselves in the clefts of the rock, protected by God, encircled by one another and bathed in the Holy Afterglow. Welcome to Stanford.

(stories from Invisible Lines of Connection: Sacred Stories of the Ordinary by Lawrence Kushner, Jewish Lights, 1996)