

LATE ONE AFTERNOON,  
AS THE SUN CAST LAZY SHADOWS ALONG ISRAEL'S SEA OF GALILEE,  
RABBI AKIVA STROLLED HOME.  
HIS MIND WAS ON WORK,  
SOME SCRIPTURES HE'D BEEN STUDYING,  
AND LOST IN THE DETAILS THAT DAY,  
HE DIDN'T REALIZE THAT INSTEAD OF TAKING A LEFT TURN  
TOWARD THE CITY GATES WHERE HE LIVED,  
HE HAD MISTAKENLY TAKEN A RIGHT TURN.  
SO NOW, AS THE SUN SANK BEHIND THE MOUNTAINS,  
HE FOUND HIMSELF ON A PATH  
LEADING TO THE IMMENSE GATE OF A ROMAN FORTRESS.  
  
RABBI AKIVA STOOD IN FRONT OF THE GATE  
REALIZING WHAT HAD HAPPENED,  
WHEN SUDDENLY, HE HEARD A VOICE BOOMING DOWN  
FROM ABOVE THE GATE.  
STARTLED, HE REALIZED IT WAS THE VOICE  
OF A ROMAN CENTURIAN GUARD STANDING ATOP THE WALL.  
THE GUARD SHOUTED DOWN TO THIS STRANGER:

**“WHO ARE YOU? WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?”**

FLUSTERED, RABBI AKIVA COULD ONLY RESPOND TO THESE FRIGHTENING WORDS WITH, “WHAT?”

AGAIN THE GUARD CALLED OUT,

**“WHO ARE YOU? WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?”**

RABBI AKIVA NOW HAD A FEW MOMENTS TO GATHER HIS THOUGHTS AND HE SHOUTED BACK UP INTO THE DARK AT THE GUARD:

“HOW MUCH DO YOU GET PAID TO ASK ME THESE QUESTIONS?”

THE GUARD WAS CONFUSED,

WHY WOULD THIS STRANGER ASK SUCH A THING?

SO AFTER A FEW MOMENTS OF SILENCE HE SAID,

“TWO DRACHMA PER WEEK!”

AND RABBI AKIVA, WITH INTENSE CONVICTION,

SHOUTED BACK TO THIS ROMAN CENTURIAN:

“I’LL PAY YOU DOUBLE IF YOU STAND OUTSIDE OF MY HOUSE  
AND ASK ME THOSE TWO QUESTIONS EVERY MORNING!”

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“WHO ARE YOU?” AND “WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

THIS IS OUR ESSENTIAL QUESTION DURING THE DAYS OF AWE. //

IS THERE A MESSAGE BURNING IN OUR HEARTS?

OR A QUESTION TRYING TO BE HEARD?

MAYBE IT IS SCARY.

BUT MAYBE IT ALSO HAS THE POTENTIAL

FOR DEEP TESHUVAH, RETURN TO OUR HEARTS.

IN A FEW MOMENTS,

WE’LL JOIN TOGETHER IN THE PRAYER *VA-HASHEVOTAH*.

WE’LL SING THE WORDS, “*VA-HASHEVOTAH EL L’VAVECHA*.”

*YOU SHALL RETURN TO YOUR HEARTS. //*

“WHO ARE YOU?” AND “WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

FOR WHAT DOES YOUR HEART YEARN?

DIVINE MYSTERY, HELP US TO CONNECT TO OUR HEARTS.

HELP US TO DISCOVER A PATH LEADING TO OUR FULLEST LIFE.

AS WE TURN INWARD,  
SOME CERTAINTIES MAY COLLAPSE.  
INTERNAL BARRIERS WHICH ONCE SHIELDED US  
MAY NOW BLOCK OUR PROGRESS.  
*VA-HASHEVOTAH* CALLS US TO NEWNESS AND POSSIBILITY.

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HOW CAN WE FOSTER CHANGE  
FROM A HEART-CENTERED PLACE OF LOVE?  
SO MUCH OF OUR PAIN AND OUR FEAR AND OUR DARKNESS  
COME FROM SELF-JUDGMENT:  
THE STORIES THAT WE TELL OURSELVES ABOUT WHO WE ARE  
AND WHO WE CAN BE....  
“I AM NEVER FULLY PRESENT BECAUSE I’M A WORK-A-HOLIC.  
I AM SCARED OF CONFLICT.  
I AM A BAD SON.”  
IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT: RELEASING GUILT AND SHAME.

THE ETERNAL HOLDS OUR HEARTS GENTLY.  
WE CAN INHABIT THAT *COMPASSION*.  
WE CAN SEE THE WAYS WE HAVE MISSED THE MARK  
AND KNOW CHANGE IS POSSIBLE.  
THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT WE OVERLOOK OUR SHORTCOMINGS.

RATHER, WE BRING WHOLE-HEARTEDNESS  
TO THE PROCESS OF TURNING INWARD.

WE CAN FORGIVE OURSELVES FOR THE PATTERNS  
THAT DISTANCE US FROM OUR HEARTS.

WE CAN FORGIVE OURSELVES  
FOR THE DARKNESS OF SELF-JUDGMENT.

WE CAN FORGIVE OTHERS FOR THEIR SHORTCOMINGS  
WITH RENEWED COMPASSION.

THEN, WE INVITE NEW POSSIBILITY.

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I INVITE US TO TAKE A MOMENT NOW, TO CLOSE OUR EYES,  
TO CONSIDER THE QUESTION BELLOWED FROM THE TOP  
OF THE ROMAN FORTRESS,  
AND ANSWER FOR OURSELVES.

“WHAT ARE WE MEANT TO BE DOING HERE?”

“WHAT PATH WILL LEAD US TO OUR HEARTS?”

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INFINITE ONE, ENABLE US TO TRULY RETURN TO OUR HEARTS  
SO THAT WE CAN RELEASE BARRIERS TO LASTING CHANGE.

FREE US FROM THE ANGST OR COMPLACENCY

THAT KEEP US CAPTIVE.

*“VA-HASHEVOTAH EL L’VAVECHA,”*

HELP US DISCOVER THEM.

HELP US ARTICULATE THEM.

GRANT US THE BRAVERY FOR TRANSFORMATION.

*Shana Tovah.*