

Glimmers

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What's the shortest possible spiritual experience?... is a strange thing to ask today of all days.

My nomination is Amen. Half a second, one word out loud – I heard your prayer. Some research says you could cut that in half, that we're wired sometimes to go *ooooh* automatically at something amazing..

What if you had five to fifteen seconds? Blessing the Shabbat candles. Or when you see your team's right fielder race to the corner, and before he lets go of the ball you're off your feet because you just *know* he's got the batter dead to rights at second base.

One up from there are the 30-second spiritual experiences. Starting here it's different. Thirty seconds isn't long, but it's not nothing. You know this, from anytime you've asked a question to someone and they don't answer right away – thirty seconds of waiting seems like forever. What can you experience spiritually in thirty seconds? If you're an ocean person: one wave, coming all the way in and breaking, going out, until the next.. Some of these I hope you've had this morning – in the singing, or an awareness passing through your mind that all of these people are saying Amen to you, not even knowing if you're yearning for something specific or just *please, a good year*.

One of my own repeating thirty-second-ish spiritual experiences involves a page from a code of Jewish law from the 12th century, and a person I never met named Shira Palmer-Sherman, *zichrona livracha*, her memory for a blessing.

The particular page is from chapter 7 of Rabbi Moses Maimonides' laws of tzedakah. I can see in my mind's eye exactly what it looks like in the compact volume over in my office that was so adorable back when I bought it in Yerushalayim, back when my eyes could read the tiny print of the commentaries.

I'd been teaching this text for a few years to teens when a colleague, a rabbinical student named Mike Schultz, invited me to co-teach it with him at a program at the Jewish Theological Seminary, in memory of his friend Shira, who had died in a tragic accident while they were in college at Harvard. I had known of Shira, because she was one of the closest camp friends of one of my high school students in Long Island.

"Shira" is Hebrew for song, and I had heard that she embodied the Talmudic saying *kishmah ken hi*, when a person is just like their name. Shira Palmer-Sherman loved show tunes and staging musicals. At her funeral, her friend Tova Serkin told how Shira had a silly gesture she would often do when she would sing or dance, to the point that her friends actually gave the gesture its own name, "song and dance." At Hillel lunches on Shabbat, at a certain line in one of the songs, all of Shira's friends would look across the room to catch her eye, and do her "song and dance" back at her.

Her friend Mike and I were exploring the text from Maimonides a lot together at this particular time about twenty years ago. It's about the connection between individual kindness and working broadly for justice, and Mike told me how Shira Palmer-Sherman embodied these teachings.

When they were in college, working conditions for staff in the dining halls had deteriorated due to labor shortages. The campus newspaper reported tensions between cafeteria workers and their managers, and also how rude many students were to the overworked people serving them lunch and dinner. But Shira would go out of her way in that atmosphere to talk to the people who served her in the cafeteria line. She was invested in their cause and she knew their names, and wanted to hear their stories and updates from day to day. Unusual for an undergraduate – for adults too.

When she would encounter a person begging in Harvard Square, she would talk to them and take the time to buy them something to eat.

Why did these anecdotes about a young person I never met, whose face I cannot picture, make an impact on me? Because as exciting as the teachings of Maimonides are conceptually, Shira happened to be the first person I heard of who seemed to demonstrate that you could live by them from day to day. So after we taught together in her honor, Mike's stories about her pushed me to think about how I act. And how now I couldn't just teach this page from Maimonides as discussion prompts and possibilities – I was now accountable to their reality.

And ever since, almost every time I take out the book with the tiny print, or one of the several handouts I've made of the text to teach in classrooms or cafes, I have a twenty-to-thirty-second spiritual experience of my own: I think of my admiration for Mike, a big influence on me whom I've lost touch with; and I think about *his* love and admiration for a friend he had and lost; and I think about my own excitement to know for the first time how a teaching on a page from the twelfth century actually looked in real life, and then about the many Shira's of all ages I've met ever since then.

These twenty-to-thirty second experiences are examples of what a social worker named Deb Dana has called *glimmers*.

Glimmers are the opposite of *triggers*. A trigger disrupts our stability and our sense of safety, by suddenly cuing up an association with a past trauma. A glimmer, by contrast, is a micro-event that quickly brings us to wholeness and tranquility, by suddenly cuing up a memory of connection or awe.

According to Deb Dana, there is a biology to glimmers. The longest threads in our body are a set of nerves known collectively as the vagus nerve, or the vagal system. The vagal system has two main functions: to speed us up for fight or flight, or to shut us down to avoid heading into danger or expending resources our body doesn't have. Our brains are wired for danger, to look out for bad. But recent research has suggested a third vagal pathway. It's nuanced – in response to positive connection, instead of just stimulating us more, it calls on our higher functions and it relaxes us; calms us without shutting us down. It helps us communicate and gain information. And Deb Dana suggests that this

part of the vagal system rewires us, glimmer by glimmer. Each glimmer can work to take back pathways created by trauma, and make us less susceptible to triggers. It's not just a momentary bath of oxytocin that makes us feel good; this is more an update to our actual hardware.

Glimmers aren't peak experiences, but they can change us nonetheless. Dr. Justine Grosso suggests we begin to rewire if we can hold our focus on a glimmer for at least thirty seconds.

The notion of glimmers could have come right out of the Kabbalah, in particular the mystical teachings of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria of Tzfat in the 16th century, known as the Ari.

The Ari taught that in the beginning there was only the Divine, symbolized as a powerful Light everywhere. To make room for the universe, the Divine had to pull inward and leave an empty space in the middle, and into that space the Divine projected a beam of light. But there was nothing here that could hold such a light, and so the beam shattered into small pieces and scattered as sparks throughout the universe. Each spark is called a *nitzotz* – a glimmer, like a star against the night sky.

Some *nitzotzot* are easier to find – in love, in grand ideas. Some are covered under more layers, even in inanimate things. Our spiritual task is to approach anything with the *kavvanah* or intention of connecting to its *nitzotz*, its glimmer. Doing so puts back together the puzzle of the universe, making

Adonai Echad again, the Divine into One – and brings our souls with our own glimmers closer to all the glimmers, all the other souls, and to the One.

A spark, a *nitzotz* or glimmer, is scattered from the original light, a reflection of a reflection – as my brief stories about Shira Palmer-Sherman are built on other people’s memories. For her family and friends, Shira is far more than a glimmer.

In my own thirty-second glimmer related to her a lot is packed – about my self-conception and the story of my career. Glimmers can be simple too – one of the most-watched teachings about glimmers is a video explaining the idea, with soothing music and a person lying in the grass in a breeze.

In this time of great negativity, we each need glimmers more than ever, to sustain ourselves and rewire ourselves – to prevent ourselves from becoming even more wired for fear and anger. But it’s not easy. Sometimes it seems like there are just fewer glimmers out there. So we have to stretch toward the glimmers that are not obvious, in ways that are also not obvious.

My dean at the Seminary, Rabbi Bill Lebeau, tells the story of his interview for rabbinical school. When Bill walked into his interview, he was surprised to see chairing the panel none other than Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, only one of the greatest spiritual teachers of the generation.

Trying to put Bill at ease after a series of tough intellectual questions, Heschel asked, “Mr. Lebeau... Did you see God today?”

Bill was thrown – what would *you* say to Heschel? Finally he said, “Rabbi Heschel, I live on the corner of 104th Street and Broadway. Often when I come to the Seminary, I walk two blocks over ... into Riverside Park. ... I always enjoy the flowers, the river, and the beautiful sound of the birds singing in the trees... But today ...I was very nervous about getting to this interview on time... I walked directly along Broadway. It was noisy and dirty and filled with distractions. To answer your question honestly, I have to tell you I did not see God today.”

You can probably guess how Rabbi Heschel responded. “First, Mr. Lebeau, please tell me if, while you were hurrying..., did you, by any chance, notice the trees and flowers that were growing in the middle of Broadway?... Did you not find that an amazing example of God’s power, Mr. Lebeau; that such beautiful nature could appear as if growing out of the pavement of the street?” And then Heschel asked about the cars and the buses: “Isn’t that amazing, Mr. Lebeau, that God could create human minds that could develop such devices to contribute to the comfort and ease of human life?” And finally Heschel asked, of course, about the people Bill passed on the gray concrete blocks of Broadway.

Rabbi Lebeau tells of meekly agreeing to all of this, leaving the interview convinced he would not be admitted to rabbinical school but nonetheless excited beyond belief to walk home down Broadway with the full consciousness of the glimmers that Heschel had instructed him about.

The Kabbalah says that many of the *nitzotzot*, the sparks, are very hard to find, because they are enclosed in *klipot*. A *klipah* is a husk, a peel around the fruit – metaphorically anything from a translucent membrane to a thin wrapping to a thick shell or a lead box. The *klipah* says: Don't look *here* for a glimmer.

And our overstimulated brains spit out their own *klipot*, don't let us take even a second to notice the person saying a prayer we could have said Amen to, or fifteen or thirty seconds to hear the person who is quiet or doesn't speak as fast as the banter all around.

And sometimes our own suffering prevents us from seeing the *nitzotz* right nearby.. In the Torah reading today, Hagar is suffering. Cast out into the desert with Yishma'el, she places him by a bush so she won't even see him anymore. An angel comes to Hagar, calls her name, and tells her that the Divine has heard her son just as he is, and that he will become a great nation. Then the angel shows Hagar the well of water, the glimmer that was there the whole time.

Why doesn't the angel show Hagar the well first? I think it's to teach us that often before we can look for glimmers, we ourselves have to be seen. The angel tells Hagar: God notices you, and there is a future for you, not just safety from trauma but real flourishing. Only then can Hagar look for the glimmers around, the ones that will ultimately rewire her as she heads forward into a future that won't be easy in the short term. Look Hagar, says the angel, says God: To Me, *you* are a glimmer.

Shira Palmer-Sherman would do that, talking to the people in the street and then finding out what she could bring them to eat.

Noticing glimmers and holding onto them for thirty seconds or more actually creates more of them. People who are noticed can glow. Things that are noticed can glimmer. Once more the Kabbalah has an intuition about this. Jews say blessings, *b'rachot*, a five-second spiritual experience upon seeing a rainbow or a friend we haven't seen for a long time. The Kabbalists often add before the *b'racha*: "Here I am, prepared and invited, to bring together the Ultimate Light and the lower lights in unity. *Hineni muchan umzuman.. l'shem yichud Kudsha Brich Hu u'Shechintei.*" They lengthen a blessing, hold a five-second experience toward thirty, rewiring in the process.

Surely, we can't fix the world just through thirty-second glimmers. Rabbi Lebeau worried that by noticing the *nitzotzot* on Broadway he might stop noticing the suffering there. But he came to understand that if you see one new person as a glimmer, you won't be able to stop there. Glimmers remake the world by remaking us. People who respond only in overstimulated anger, or who are shut down by fear, can't make things better in the long run. Glimmers create the conditions for a better world by rewiring us, so we have the staying power to do more than fight-or-flight or shut down.

This ritual today is long, yes, but also it's a series of thirty-second opportunities. Sounds that strike us, memories and reflections that come to us – and intentional focus-points we work to find or make in the service. We all suffer moments of self-doubt and insignificance, when we feel like we are all

husk and no spark, all *klipah* and no *nitzotz*. But here we find out again there are people who see us glimmer, who believe our prayers are worth hearing and saying Amen to. We come here to rewire ourselves and each other.

And it's my conviction that if we do that with intention, kavvanah by thirty-second kavvanah, we're more likely to do that during the week and outside of here. Thirty seconds just hand themselves to us all the time. They don't require planning a retreat or a drive to the ocean; it could be any time we catch ourselves looking down at the phone for no real reason. In line at the store, you don't even have to talk to someone, just wonder about the clerk, the dream their paycheck supports or the person whose care it supports. Take thirty seconds to talk to someone – a child, a teen, anyone you might in five seconds have said quickly *Hey what'd you do recently* and then left it at that – Push yourself to stay in that for a whole half a minute.

And visit your favorite sea shore, and squeal when the first notes of your favorite Taylor Swift song comes on the radio.

In this negative time, we need glimmers more than ever, and this could be our mission as Jews in the world of 5784. We could help people around us rewire *their* vagal system. The Torah says our destiny as Jews is to be one day as many as the stars of the sky and the sands by the ocean. What are those if not glimmers. Imagine if whenever someone recognized you, a member of this community, or even just read the name Temple Beth Abraham – they'd just automatically launch into a deeply familiar "song and dance"!

Shabbat Shalom, and Shana Tova!