

03/17/17

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# Adonai, Entropy, and the Color Blue

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***Becki Marcus '15** is a freshman at Brown currently reveling in the possible paths that life is offering. Inspired by Bronfman, she is involved in the Religious Literacy Project, an initiative to enhance the understanding of the lived experiences, not just academic study, of the main world religions. She has been involved in organizations on criminal justice reform; and her classes are getting her excited about environmental work too, so she'll see where she ends up! She also loves playing frisbee on her team, the Cosmic Rays.*

As Adonai instructs the building of the Tent of Meeting in the wilderness, the *ruah elohim*, the creative energy or life-breath of the divine, rushes among the people (Exodus 31:3). The only other time this life spirit appears in the Torah is when the *ruah elohim* hovers over the dark waters before the creation of the earth. The creation of the earth figures as a series of divisions, the ordering of chaos. The act of separation, connoting holiness, becomes wedded to the act of creation. In the creation of a holy space on earth, Adonai delivers orders and particular instructions for people to carry out. Yet the presence of the divine seems to emulate the entropic tendency of the universe to devolve toward chaos, as the presence of Adonai manifests in smoke dissipating into the air or in the form of clouds. Here a people grasping for a tangible understanding of the divine meet holiness that defies sensual or intellectual understanding, manifest through ever-growing internal disorder.

03/17/17

Adonai instructs the ordering of physical space in the Tent of Meeting; however, the manifestations of the divine throughout the parsha defy confinement or order. The specificity of these instructions create a sense of intimacy between holy creation and human creation. As if a baker, Adonai gives Moses recipes for spices to mix for the anointing oil, and as an herbalist, instructs which herbs to use for the incense. Adonai tells Moses with regards to the incense, “You shall grind some of it very finely, and place some of it twice daily on the incense Altar, which is situated in front of the Ark of Testimony in the Tent of Meeting, where I will meet with you” (30:35). While Adonai’s instructions are specific and tangible, Ein Sof manifests in the constantly disappearing incense smoke—the visible expression of entropy dispersing into the atmosphere. Thus, Adonai delivers detailed instructions for a space where one can meet with the intangible divine, a presence constantly escaping view and form.

My friend Emma one morning over breakfast showed me a video about how entropy is like coffee-milk. At first you have separate milk and coffee, the two substances whole without any internal disorder. Then as the milk plunges into and swirls with the coffee, there are millions of ways of rearranging the various particles of milk and coffee. This is our universe now—the milk just poured into the coffee, the white tendrils reaching to the bottom of the cosmic cup, in ever-increasing disorder. We see in all the variable complexity of the world, a greater degree of possible rearrangements, and then eventually what do you get? Pure coffee-milk, degree of internal disorder: 0. After the big bang the matter of the universe will expand so much that it will become one homogeneous mass, what before the creation of the earth was called *tohu vavohu*. This initial oneness, also described as chaos, is also the end result of any entropic system. The universe will return to this watery darkness where the *ruah elohim* hovered moments before creation.

Evoking this watery world, outside the Tent of Meeting, Adonai orders a *laver*, a basin of water that reflects the sky. The Torah: A Women’s Commentary includes this detail: “According to 38:8, the basin was made from mirrors donated by ‘the women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting’.” So if we picture the *laver*, the priests see their hands disrupt the surface of the sky as ripples form across the sun and clouds. The *laver* reflects the unity of the universe, the *tohu vavohu*, a harmony of sky coming to water in a oneness of blue before

03/17/17

Adonai began the project of separation. In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit meditates on the blue in sky and water: “The world is blue at its edges and its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in water.” The dispersion of the blue light expresses the relation of Ein Sof to humans, always escaping out of human grasp and into the atmosphere, the constant loss of entropy. Blue has also been the most indescribable color. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the sheep are violet, the sea wine-dark or green, the soldiers' faces pale with fear; but never once is there a mention of the color blue. According to 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy, “across all cultures, words for colors appear in stages. And blue always comes last.” The holiness of Adonai is ever escaping and entropic, yet always whole, like the indescribable blue reflected from the sky into the water.

Then how do the people go about the project of evoking holiness? Throughout the instructions for the tabernacle, Adonai's intonations of sacredness change subject: “This shall be an anointing oil sacred to Me throughout the generations” (30:31), “it is to be held sacred to you” (30:32); Adonai also instructs Moses to tell the people, “you shall keep the Sabbath for it is holy to you” (30:14) and also says, “On the seventh day there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest holy to Adonai” (30:15). In the Tent of Meeting, and on the seventh day what is sacred to You and what is sacred to me come together. The subjectivity of sacredness seems to echo the uncertainty of quantum physics. One can't measure simultaneously the momentum and position of a quantum particle. In parallel, one can't know every aspect of the holiness of a place, object, or time. We need multiple different measurements from different perspectives to come together to create the closest possible conception of holiness.

When worshipping the Calf, the people cannot embrace the multidimensional subjectivity of the sacred. Adonai reinvokes the commandment to observe the Sabbath after this episode of idolatry. As holiness transcends the mechanical, Newtonian plane, the Israelites dwell in a palace in time that defies embodiment. Heschel ruminates, “In this atmosphere a discipline is a reminder of adjacency to eternity. Indeed, the splendor of the day is expressed in terms of *abstentions*, just as the mystery of God is more adequately conveyed *via negationis*, in the categories of *negative theology* which claims that we can never say what He is, we can only say what He is not.” Thus, we take a day to honor the mystery of the

03/17/17

divine, to inhabit longing for the intangible essence of the sacred. Solnit describes blue as, “the color of solitude and of desire, the color of here seen from there, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains” (29). Perhaps the best word to evoke the feeling of looking at the distant blue, of dwelling in the mystery of the divine is an untranslatable word in Portuguese: *saudade*. It describes the nostalgia or longing for something that perhaps never happened, a feeling that at once describes melancholy and bliss. Perhaps the longing for a tangible sense of holiness that never existed, for a Tent of Meeting in which to grasp and dwell with Ein Sof. The Sabbath is the time to sit on Sinai and long for the haze over the horizon, all of the lost light dispersed after the first seventh day.

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#### Related Texts

<http://www.npr.org/sections/latino/2014/02/28/282552613/saudade-an-untranslatable-undeniably-potent-word>

<http://www.radiolab.org/story/211213-sky-isnt-blue/>

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Penguin Group, USA. New York, New York. 2005.

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03/17/17

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