



EROS IS ETHICS

FROM: THE MYSTERY OF LOVE

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ECHOES OF EMPTINESS—THE EROTIC AND THE ETHICAL

The arena where emptiness—nonerotic living—is most destructive is in the ethical. Every ethical failure comes from the absence of eros. It is their inability to stay in the experience of emptiness that moves people to violate their ethics. All crimes are in some sense crimes of passion. But this is actually a misnomer. What we mean is that all crimes are rooted in the fear of passion's loss! We cannot imagine what life would be like without the eros that we stand to lose.

Joel finds out that his wife is having an affair. The betrayal opens up the void within. Afraid that if he confronts her she will leave, he slowly becomes a workaholic to dull the pain. Work for Joel has become pseudo eros.

Or take Susan, who was verbally and physically abused by her mother. Never able to claim the dignity of her anger, she became gradually disempowered as a person. As an adult, she is constantly furious at her children, often lashing out brutally at them. She seeks to assure herself that she is still alive and powerful. For Susan, her displaced anger at her children is pseudo eros.

Or more mundane examples. We cheat on income taxes because we think that the extra money will paper over some of the fear of life. Money becomes pseudo eros.

Or we exaggerate our accomplishments because we are afraid that our real story is insufficient to fill the void. Self-aggrandizement is pseudo eros.

All of our inappropriate behaviors that violate our values are really us crying out, "Pay attention to me—I exist!" All forms of acting out are pseudo eros.

Life is about walking through the void. Every time we walk through and not around the void we come out stronger. Every time we are seduced by pseudo eros, ethical breakdown is around the corner. There is no ethics without eros.

The biblical myth text describes the pit into which Joseph was thrown by his jealous brothers: "The pit was empty, it had not water," reads the story. "But isn't this redundant?" ask the students. "If it had no water, don't we know that it was empty?" The master replies, "This was an emptiness which bred evil. Water it did not have, snakes and scorpions it did!" Emptiness always breeds in its wake ethical collapse.

Of course, the real pit at play in the biblical myth is not simply a pit in the earth. The pit is in Joseph's brothers' very ground of being. Their own gaping sense of emptiness makes them envy Joseph so. It is their inability to walk through their own pit (void) that moves them to project a pit

in the world in which they would cast their brother. The snakes and scorpions come from the unacknowledged emptiness of the brothers.

No, Joseph is not perfect, but when we respond to a person viscerally, it virtually always tells us more about ourselves than about the person. The brothers' own deeply felt emptiness—their pit—moved them to the murderous rage of attempted fratricide.

You see, until this point in the book of Genesis one son has always been chosen as the inheritor of blessing. Abel was chosen over Cain. Shem over Ham and Yefet. Isaac over Ishmael, and Jacob over Esau. The brothers were convinced that Jacob, their father, was going to likewise choose Joseph over them. Joseph's existence called into question the integrity of their stories. When the value and dignity of our stories are called into question we brush up against the emptiness. The inability to walk through the emptiness to the fullness is the source of all ethical collapse.

Ethics without eros is doomed. Only from a place of fullness of being can we reach out in love to others. The first step to love is always self-love. If you don't fill yourself up with love, then you have precious little to dole out. But as long as your love is not rooted in your erotic matrix—the inside of your fullness—it is doomed to fail. You will have to rely on an ethical source outside yourself, which will always make you view yourself as a sinner. No one is ever able to consistently follow external rules that seem to violate their inner desire.

However, if ethics well up from the inside, if you are at the center, then sin is not disobedience but the violation of human well-being. *In the end all ethical failure is a violation of eros—your own or someone else's.*

God and Nature

We now come to the second great shadow of circle consciousness. The pagans insisted that divinity was in trees and in all of nature. But the essential biblical idea is that God is also *beyond* nature. God is the creator of nature and therefore not trapped within it. Biblical myth therefore opens with the Genesis story—"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The powerful and revolutionary implication is that *God is not nature*. Unlike the Greek, Roman, pagan, or Buddhist pantheons, biblical myth insists on a God who is both within and infinitely beyond the circle, radically immanent as well as transcendent.

When we say that God is infinitely beyond trees, we are also saying that if you can connect to God he can free you from the ensnaring web of nature. The notion that a human being is created

in the image of God means for the Hebrew mystic that a person has it within them to reach beyond the natural.

The reason this is so critical is because in biblical consciousness, the loving God's primary demand is ethical behavior. The single most important expression of love is how we treat one another, not how we think about one another. Perhaps the most important principle of Hebrew ethics is that although thoughts count, actions are infinitely more important. Moreover, in the formulation of sixteenth-century master Aron of Barcelona—"A person is formed by their actions." Treat a person lovingly, and you will love them in the end. Love a person passionately and treat them unethically, and you will be alienated from them in the end.

When anyone suggests that we need to act against our instinctive nature we get slightly uncomfortable. Isn't the unnatural intrinsically a violation of the right? The best antidote to the superficial aggrandizement of all that is natural is to keep toilet training in mind. Probably everyone who reads this book relieves themselves someplace other than in their clothes. This is, of course, decidedly "unnatural." Indeed as a kind of protest against the violation of the natural implicit in toilet training, the central ritual of one pagan religion—the cult of Peor—was that its adherents defecate on the Peor idol itself. Biblical myth explicitly sets itself up as the alternative to the Peor cult.

Ethical behavior always requires that we will be able to act against our primal instinctive natures. *If we were only part of nature, then clearly we could not be expected ever to control our nature.* We are both part of nature, and beyond nature. Only because of this paradox are we capable of self-control.

What this means is that values need to serve as a guide in training our natures. Biblical line consciousness insisted that the most important value was ethical behavior. To be ethical, one must be responsible. Response-able. Able to respond to the conflicting drives of nature and nurture by charting a course that reflects an ethical vision. One can only respond if one can step outside the circle. Responsibility stems from a person's awareness of their ability to control or transcend their instinctive natures.

A contemporary example: A priest can decide not to abuse a young boy if he is at least potentially able to resist his nature and say no! But in the pagan cult, the homoerotic attraction between priest and young boy was made sacred by being made part of the temple cult. In the

context of a circle ethos, not only sexual drives are considered uncheckable. There can also ultimately be no accountability for doing evil. Mother Teresa and Hitler are equally innocent and equally guilty. Since there is no real possibility of choosing other than what you chose, you cannot be expected to do anything other than what you did. All the forces of nature acted upon you and produced the only possible result: precisely what you did. It is therefore not surprising that paganism is laced with deterministic overtones. Biblical myth insists that after all of the influences have had their say, we have a divine core that is beyond nature and can therefore choose against nature.

Circle consciousness claims that people are naturally the best that they can be. But the most important act of love, according to the Hebrew gospel, is to develop a training system for goodness. The problem, argues the circle, is not goodness but alienation. The great evil for the circle is to be cut off, distant, disenchanted, out of the circle. Line consciousness disagrees with the circle and says that people are potentially good but not naturally good. In biblical myth people are born innocent, but they are not born good. Goodness must be learned and even cultivated. The great evil for the line is to do evil.

The commonplace phrase “a good baby” is actually a misnomer. Babies are not born evil, but they are not born good either. In fact, as infant psychologists have pointed out, babies are actually minidictators (albeit adorable dictators). The ethical hero in the mother-baby relationship is most certainly the mother and not the baby. The baby presents his parents with a list of incessant demands, which he expects to have met no matter what else might be going on. Whether his parents are in the middle of a financial crisis, a medical emergency, or simply want to make love is irrelevant to the baby. Having been a kid who was very much the school misfit, I can tell you that kids are also naturally cruel. As a matter of fact, the level of raw meanness and sadism that kids are capable of inflicting on other kids is simply incomprehensible ... that is, if you believe people to be naturally good.

For biblical myth the belief that people are naturally the best that they can be is not only wrong but also destructive. If people are naturally good, then evil must be the result of some set of external forces. These external forces could be anything from social environment, economic circumstance, hand-guns, parents, television violence, government cutbacks, or the devil. The result of this approach is that an enormous amount of energy is spent trying to fix all sorts of outside stuff while almost no time at all is spent transmitting the values that might change or develop our internal

natures. This kind of thinking is an extension of pagan thought, which held that the manipulation of external nature would bring the good. The Hebrew Bible, then as now, says no to this thinking. Hebrew gospel teaches that only the control and refinement of our internal nature can bring the good.

In the view of the Hebrew Bible, the essential demand of God was justice. It is Dostoyevsky who best captures the Hebrew God when he writes in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “Without God all is permitted.” God was experienced by the Hebrews as a parent who is truly happy only when his children treat one another well. For this reason biblical wisdom insisted that God was beyond nature and that human beings were *homo imago dei*—created in the image of God. The power of this idea gives birth to the best of Western civilization.

There is another critical reason why the line-driven ethical prophet does not experience God as being exclusively in nature. If God were in nature and not beyond nature, then nature would be our source of ethics. It is clear, though, that for all of her splendor in reflecting a pale cast of divine beauty, nature is amoral. The law of nature is nearly always that the strong kill the weak. Certainly the helpless and the infirm have little chance of survival in the natural order other than as a dinner for a stronger adversary. If we were to transpose natural law into the human world, we would certainly live the law of the jungle. Social services, hospitals, and help for the disabled are all profoundly “unnatural,” at least according to the law of nature in the nonhuman world. In fact, the hospital is a direct corollary of line and not circle consciousness. The morality of the line insists that those higher on the line—that is to say stronger and with more means—take care of those lower on the line. This is the faith and God experience of the prophets.

The Prophet and the Pagan

Let’s frame the clash between circle and line in the most striking possible terms.

The prophet, the hero of the Hebrew Bible, represents ethics—the line. The pagan, hero of the ancient world into which biblical thought was born, represents eros—the circle. The clash between the prophet and the pagan—the circle and the line—is in the end the clash between the erotic and the ethical.

Obviously the prophet is not devoid of eros and the pagan not entirely oblivious of ethics. Yet the goal is their full integration. The erotic and ethical must merge. This is the secret of the cherubs and the model of the sexual.

What the prophet and the pagan respectively incarnate, however, is made manifest when the erotic and the ethical clash. An oft-quoted line from Jung, heir to the pagan myth tradition, is the best summation I have ever heard of the pagan position: “I’d rather be whole than good.”

The importance of this maxim is evidenced by the many times one hears it cited by Jung’s students. Apparently the circle will always seem more whole than the line. Circle and Shechina are the experience of eros for which we all yearn. The pagan yearns to feel whole. Indeed for the pagan the alienation from divinity is so palpable and painful that it must be overcome at all costs, even if ethics are the price. This is where the balanced scales start precariously to slip. It was Jung who was sadly seduced by the pagan goddess Ashera into a flirtation with Nazism, that menacing shadow of eros which horrifically darkened our world just a few short decades ago.

The prophet always responds, “I’d like to be whole. But if I have to choose, I’d rather be good than whole.” This is why the prophet is the great critic of the Temple. The erotic fulfillment of the Temple experience was all too often a replacement for the kind of direct ethical action that could heal the world. It is the widow and the orphan, the vulnerable and the dispossessed, who must be the primary concern of the *homo religiosus*. This is the word of the prophets.

The prophets oppose paganism with all of their ethical fire and passion. Their opposition to paganism is based upon pagan cruelty and corruption.

Built into the pagan ritual are demands for parents to burn their children as a sacrifice to the gods. Hardly a mention of the pagan occurs in the Hebrew Bible without a reference to this practice. “They have set their pagan abominations in my house... to burn their sons and daughters in fire.” (Jeremiah 7:30, 31.) The burning of children was not the exception in pagan worship. Rather it was the model of the pagan idea that erotic abandonment to the god must, by its very definition, overrun all intuitive human ethical boundaries.

Listen to the ethical cry of Isaiah in chapter 1:

*I do not want your multitude of sacrifices
I delight not in the blood of bullocks or goats or rams.
Do not come to seek my face...
as you trample my courts of justice...
your hands are full of blood...
wash yourselves, make yourselves clean...*

*cease your evil doings... seek fair judgment,
argue the case of the widow and the orphan...
Zion will be redeemed
by justice and... integrity.*

The ecstatic service of the Jerusalem temple, religiously powerful and important as it might be, had become primary. The reaching for Shechina experience overrode all; eros overrode ethos, and the prophet exploded in divine rage.

Having said that, we want to make a radical claim—which, as is often the case, is patently obvious once you see it. On the essential interpretation of reality, the prophet was actually a circle and not a line. The difference was that the pagan was a first-stage circle archetype and the prophet a third-stage circle archetype.

The prophet's line expression is a necessary corrective response to the pagan consciousness that dominated the world at the time. The prophet saw his role to overturn that pagan ethic, which was bound up with so much cruelty. Human sacrifice was but one of the outrages that prophecy sought to eliminate. The prophet was wildly successful and gave an ethical cast to the foundation stones of all Western civilization.

The Erotic and the Ethical

In the picture of the prophet as a social reformer, it is, however, too easy to lose sight that at his core, he was an erotic mystic.

Though the prophet insisted that nature was not all of God, he explicated with all his being that God was all of nature. Even as he decried the pagan claim that identified God with the Asherah tree, he knew and rejoiced in the truth that God was fully present and accessible “on every hill and under every tree.” God was not only reflected in nature as the external creator but God was also fully present in nature. The later mystics used *mamash*, meaning literally “actually,” to describe that God was actually present in nature and not just as a metaphor or symbol. The words of later Hebrew mystics capture accurately prophetic consciousness. Schneur Zalman of Liadi writes that “trees and stones are *mamash* divine.” Nachman of Bratzlav told his disciples that “every blade of grass has its own (divine) song.”

The Temple in its ideal state was supposed to manifest the third-stage circle moment in

Hebrew consciousness. What the prophet realized, however, was that the people had not incorporated second-stage line consciousness. The erotic was overrunning the ethical. In principle, however, the Temple was meant to be a balance between line and circle, erotic and ethical.

Only a short distance from the seat of eros, the Holy of Holies with her sexually intertwined cherubs, was the *lishkat hagazit*, the “room of hewn stone.” This was the Chamber of Justice, whose passionate concern was the ethical—the creation of a just society. On the face of it, its sensibilities seem so far removed from the erotic motifs of the sensual and the sacred that permeated the Temple’s aura. What, after all, do ethics and eros have to do with each other?

The answer is—everything. In the short run we can train people through behaviorist rituals, social engineering, and a good deal of guilt to behave ethically. However, in the final analysis, we also find that nonerotic ethics will always collapse under the weight of contracts and contacts it cannot fulfill. The room of hewn stone must necessarily be housed in the eroticized Temple in order for its ethics truly to thrive.

Picture a house that has three consecutive rooms. In the first room is Master Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of the mystical Hassidic court of Habad, the grandfather in our story. In the second room is his son and successor, known as the Middle Master. In the third room is a small baby who will ultimately succeed his father and grandfather as the third master of Habad.

Father and grandfather are lost in erotic mystical rapture. They have crossed over to the inside; suffused with yearning they have entered the fullness of being. Eros. Suddenly the baby cries. Grandfather rises from his ecstasy, goes to pick up the child and rock him to sleep. Afterward he is unable to recapture his ecstasy. He smiles and falls asleep.

Come morning, father and grandfather meet at morning meditation. “Did you not hear the baby crying?” inquires Schneur Zalman gently of his son.

“Why no, Father. I was so caught in rapture I could hear nothing but the singing of the angels,” the Middle Master replies, secretly hoping his father would be impressed, for it seemed that he exceeded even his father in the interiority of his en-trance-ment. “You have not understood, my son,” responded Schneur Zalman, a tear slowly wending its way down his cheek “Rapture that deafens you to the crying of a baby—such holiness is not kosher.”

Another image: Abraham sits at the en-trance to his tent, deep in meditation. God appears to him in the heat of the day. Celestial fires encircle him. The breath of the Divine caresses him. Abraham basks in perfect Presence.

Abraham opens his eyes and sees in the distance three strangers passing by. He jumps up to greet them. Perhaps they are thirsty from the desert sun or in need of lodging for the night. He races after them. “But wait!” cries out God. “Where are you going... one second... we were just about to—”

“Hold that thought, God. I’ll be right back.” And off Abraham runs.

“How could it be?” inquire the fourth-century Babylonian myth masters in radical amazement. “Is not rapture with the Divine the point of everything? How could Abraham just run off and leave God hanging?!”

They answer their own question with a gorgeous Hebrew koan: “Greater is the feeding of guests than the receiving of the face of the Shechina.” *Face* and *Shechina* are words that we recognize—virtual synonyms for the erotic. And yet the imperative is clear. In the clash between the erotic and the ethical, the ethical must take priority.

In order to foster a loving world we need to merge the masculine line with the feminine circle. Any attempt to maintain line or circle consciousness when they are independent of each other is doomed to failure. The deepest wisdom of Hebrew myth will require eros and ethics to interpenetrate. Prophet and pagan will need to merge into one.

When we unpack stage three we will see that the erotic is not opposed to the ethical. For the erotic to be full and life giving, the masculine and feminine must merge. Failing to effect this erotic merger, the Shechina remains in exile. The marriage of the masculine and feminine in the sexual models the merger of the circle and the line, the erotic and the ethical, in every facet of being. Whenever that marriage fails, there is a failure of love, and failures of love always produce evil.

Indeed, every ethical failure comes from the absence of eros. It is the painful experience of emptiness that moves people to ethical violation. The universe does not tolerate a vacuum. Ethics without eros is doomed. It is only from a place of fullness of being that we can reach out in love to the other. The first step to love is always self-love. If you don’t fill yourself up with love then you have precious little to dole out. As long as my love is not rooted in my erotic matrix—the inside of my fullness—it is fated to fail. I will have to rely on an ethical center outside myself in reference to which I must always be a sinner. If ethics well up from the inside, however, and if we are at that center, then sin is not disobedience but the violation of human well-being.

In the end the only ethical failure is a violation of eros—your own or someone else’s. The

prophet in us needs to reclaim holy paganism. The pagan within must be open to hearing the call of the prophet. When the prophet and pagan meet, the Temple of the heart will be rebuilt.

I have long believed in my heart of hearts that ethics without eros cannot survive even on the ethical level. First, our erotic longing will not be assuaged by prophetic ethics. We can do the right thing our entire lives and still feel empty. The prophetic idea that God, and thus the God point within us, is beyond nature and can therefore act against nature is important. But it is only a stage in the unfolding ethical conscious of man. I was delighted many years back to happen across this passage from Abraham Kook, the greatest modern Hebrew mystic:

*We are filled with the emotion of ethics;
we yearn toward a life that is pure
Our imagination excites the desire in our heart
With images of life that are most pure and most noble.
Yet this desire cannot be realized
except through inner and outer commitment
to the light of being the Light of God,
to erotic morality
...
Morality not guided by the sacred is not deep,
and does not enter into the inwardness of the soul;
and even though a person might be drawn to it for good reason
—for she recognizes the uprightness of logical things—
this kind of instruction does not have a lasting hold
in the face of. ..passions strongly aroused.

Such a weak morality
does not have the power to guide...
the polis, the human community,
to penetrate to the depth of the soul
and to transform the heart
of universal man and of individual man
from stone to flesh.*

*There is no alternative plan for humanity
other than that it be guided by the erotic morality.
And it is much better
that a person fall a number of times
on the journey
but establish his vision of world
and the morality of his life
according to that profundity of the erotic morality,
than if he has fewer failures
but lives a weakly spiritual life
at the hands of the superficial influence
of secular morality.*

Ethics that are not rooted in eros ultimately fall apart. We yearn for eros. By exiling God from nature and secularizing the sexual, we condemn our-selves to emptiness and vacuity. For example, the company “line” ethic of the 1950s in America produced the “circle” yearning for communes and free love of the 1960s. This is the recurrent pattern of the human soul. Eros cannot be denied. Any ethical collapse is ultimately rooted in a failure of love, a lack of eros.

When we talk only about a God giving rules that run counter to our nature, the rules cannot hold. The eros of our nature will always overrun them. But if we come to understand that ethics is an erotic expression of our deeper divinity, we are truly moved to the ethical. For that is when we realize it is an expression of our deepest selves, a response to the call of our own voice. To be compelling and powerful, ethics must be an expression of your erotic divine nature and not a contradiction of it. So when the prophets insist that God, which is also the God within you, is beyond nature and can therefore act ethically against nature, they are referring only to your first nature, not to your deeper second nature. Your deeper nature is God. This is the secret whispering in the leaves of the Ashera tree and in the embrace of the cherubs.

Opposing the Temple Prostitute

Now this transmutation of the Ashera energy to the female cherub was not just a superficial “biblicizing” of a pagan notion. To read it this way would be to miss the whole point of the Hebrew

myth revolution. It was rather one of the first moves toward union, the ultimate integration between masculine and feminine, the ethical and the erotic.

Ashera was represented in most temples by both male and female prostitutes. These temple prostitutes were either sacrificed to the Goddess or engaged sexually by the king or priests as incarnations of the goddess. To say that the prophets radically opposed human sacrifice is obvious. What is more revealing is that they opposed the entire institution of the temple prostitute.

Here again it is critical to understand the nuance of the argument between prophet and pagan. Both agreed that human sexual encounter could potentially reenact and even catalyze the cosmic divine sexual encounter between the God and Goddess. The Zohar is replete with imagery in which the priest plays an essential role in arousing the feminine waters of the Shechina so she will be ready to receive her divine partner. Close readings of such passages make it deliberately unclear if the human role is only to sexually arouse the Shechina or actually to merge with her in ecstatic sexual union.

Yet the prophet passionately opposed the temple prostitute. The reason is clear. The temple prostitute was the classic case of the erotic overriding the ethical. The entire human persona of the prostitute was effaced. The sexual became an expression of the cosmic, which absolutely overrode the personal face of sexuality. The prostitute in the temple, as in contemporary society, has no name. She serves a cosmic function that “defaces” her. The prophet opposes anonymous sex because in his ethical mission his essential goal is the personalizing of the sexual. The ethical moment in sexuality of commitment and personhood needs to be seen as primary, overriding even cosmic erotic needs.

The great biblical myth affirmation is that for sex to be sacred it must be personal. Personal means connected to a story. The prostitute whose name you do not know, to whose dreams and vulnerabilities you are impervious, is the archetype of the impersonal. Impersonal (as we will see) can also describe sex that is used to weave a false story. It refers to sex that is detached from the web of soul print passions and commitments that is your life. It refers as well to sex that we reach for compulsively to cover up—even from ourselves—the dull throb of emptiness.

It is not that the biblical myth masters did not recognize the power of the impersonal and even cosmic erotic. They did. Indeed, in the myth of Luria, the world itself is re-created every moment. In every second and in every space, cosmic circles and lines erotically penetrate one another and existence is brought forth anew. Ecstasy, dance,

music, prayer, study, and meditation were all part of the prophetic service. They were all practiced in a way that would allow the initiate to access the coursing eros of being as it washed and revitalized his soul. Impersonal cosmic eros was vitally important to the prophet. But not when it required the depersonalization of a human being, the temple prostitute. And yet we need to find ways to reclaim the power of impersonal eros in our personal lives and in the larger life of the polis. If we do not, the void will continue to be filled with abusive and degrading forms of pornography. We must find a way to reclaim the eros of the temple prostitute, cleansed of its shadow qualities, even as we affirm the centrality of sexuality rooted in personal commitment and shared dreams.

The Impersonal and the Transpersonal

The prostitute archetype manifests itself in two forms. The first is the classic prostitute with whom sex is nonintimate and impersonal. The second is the Temple prostitute, who expresses the sexual as transpersonal and cosmic. The Temple prostitute would engage in transpersonal sex both with worshippers and temple priests as part of the erotic service of the Goddess. What both share in common however is that the prostitute, whether man or woman, is not related to in personal terms. The prostitute is upgraded to a symbol. Once that happens degradation is sure to follow eventually.

For the slippery slope between the impersonal and the depersonalized is seductive and steep. Thus, as powerful and even necessary as a transpersonal erotic moment might be, the prophets disallowed the Temple prostitute. The prophet recognizes that the sexual model of the erotic courses with a powerful energy that is essential to human fulfillment. However, they insisted on replacing the male and female Temple prostitutes with the male and female cherubs. This was their way of insuring that the transpersonal did not slip into the impersonal, which could slip into the nonpersonal, which could slip into the nonethical, which could slip into evil.

Remember, paganism allowed the mutilation and even slaughter and sacrifice of the prostitute as an integral and regular part of the pagan cult. Once the sacrifice of a human being who was seen only as a symbol occurred, all ethics broke down.

The prophets insist on the radical holiness of the individual. The individual is of infinite worth and dignity and can never be reduced to a symbol. It is this emphasis of infinite value—the personal story of every human being—that is the driving force of prophetic ethics. We see in our own culture

just how insightful this prophetic intuition is. Everyday pornography and soft porn may play the role of the Temple prostitute and seem innocent enough to be on the counter of respectable newsstands or on the movie channel at the best and most established hotels. But the line—driven by profit and emptiness—between the impersonal and the depersonalized is very, very slippery. Eventually it may lead to the radical depersonalization that lies at the core of all evil. Pornography based on rape, abuse of minors, and even murder—“white snuff”—is now available all over the world.

Erotic and Ethical Entitlement

Personal eros comes from living your story. But though the prophet is fully identified with eros, he insists nevertheless on the merger of ethos and eros. Now what does it mean to be ethical? The answer: to behave in a way that supports a person’s ability to live their story.

What is an ethical violation? It is to behave in a way that undermines someone else’s ability to live their story. According to biblical myth, this could be an active violation—thrift, deception, or violence. Or it could be a passive violation—failing to get involved in making the world a place where every human being has the opportunity to live their story. Since the primary ethical violation would be to violate someone’s story, the ethical and erotic merge, because the underlying principle of ethics is to affirm and support the erotic integrity of every human being’s story.

The only clash, then, between the erotic and the ethical is when my eros is at the expense of yours. Since biblical myth affirms that every human being is a *homo imago dei*, in Dante’s phrase, a divine miniature, then all human beings are equal in their erotic entitlement. Any violation of that equality would be an ethical—and an erotic—violation. So all ethical lapses are really violations of eros.

As we saw earlier, the inner impulse for all ethical violation is a lack of eros. When we human beings feel empty, exiled from our stories, we try to feed off other stories. That is the core of every ethical violation: when another person becomes not an end, a story unto themselves, but rather a means of fulfilling your own story.

Moving one step beyond what we saw in our discussion in chapter 8, it now becomes clear that there is no possible distinction between the erotic and the ethical. In fact, the word *ethics* comes from the Greek *ethos*, meaning “the special nature of a person or group”—to be precise,

their story, which is also the source of the most powerful erotic fulfillment.

The prophet insists that the erotic sexual affirm the stories of both partners in the relationship. To de-story the sexual destroys intimacy, which leads to the prostitute archetype, the exile of the Shechina, and the destruction of the Temple.

Sex models eros in that it must always emerge from deep within our story line. When it does, then we can embrace the full erotic nature of the sexual as the guiding spiritual model for all of the nonsexual dimensions of our lives.

Epilogue



Union is the ultimate erotic state. Interconnectivity, the fullness of presence, the inside of God's face, the yearning force of being, they all characterize our experience of Union. This is enlightenment. Yet for the Hebrew mystic if Union does not lead us to compassion and great love then we have missed the point. The medieval intellectual mystic Maimonides wrote a great book of mystical philosophy, *Guide for the Perplexed*. In the last sentences, after the book reaches its erotic crescendo (*Cheshek*, meaning "raw sensual passion" is the Hebrew translation of the Arabic term employed by Maimonides), he appends an implicit postscript. Paraphrasing: *If all this doesn't make you a better lover of people then you are no lover of God and certainly no lover of your self*. Eros must always lead to ethics.

The human being begins her journey as part of the circle of nature. In the creation story of Genesis 1, man and woman are created as part of the natural order. Ancient myth reflected this circle of being, in which mortals and immortals, humans and Gods, and all of nature participated together. This is the circle of eros.

Biblical consciousness injected the line of duality and ethics in the circle. Compassion must always override eros. Mysticism—in every major system of thought—protested that this line view of reality was in itself distorted and called us back to the unity consciousness of circle. This return to eros how-ever is not at the expense of ethics; much to the contrary it becomes the most powerful motive and force for loving in the world.

Isaac Luria explains that rules and ethical obligation can never be sufficient motive for compassion. It is only when I realize that both my neighbor and I are part of the Shechina that true ethics begins. When a guilty person is punished the Shechina cries out, “My head aches, my arms are in pain.” To slap another human being is to slap the Shechina. When you are kind to a fellow human being you are befriending the Shechina. In Hebrew mysticism the Shechina is embodied in us.

This is the deep understanding of the most famous of all biblical maxims: Love your neighbor as yourself. The ultimate *source* of loving is knowing your neighbor *as* yourself. The ultimate source of loving is knowing that your neighbor is part of yourself. Both of you are woven in the seamless cloak of the universe.

When the Baal Shem Tov would engage in the spiritual practice of ascensions of the soul his wife would sometimes become very frightened. He would become totally inert, and she was sometimes unable to waken him from his trance. On one such day she had become quite desperate, not knowing how to return him to this world. As she paced to and fro his baby son pulled on his beard Immediately he came to and gently asked his son, “What do you need, my son.” To attend to a person in need, taught Master Israel, is deeper than even the deepest mystical communion. It is said that the Baal Shem Tov, while listening to the language of the birds and eavesdropping on the music of the spheres, could also hear the cries of all the tormented souls in the world. All of his work was for their healing.

The body leads to the soul, and the soul leads back to the body. “When I look at the I of my body I find the I of my soul. When I look at the I of my soul I find the I of God.” The Sufis have a wonderful saying—“Say your praise to Allah and tie your camel to a post.” What this really means is, touch the fullness of God and let that inspire even the simplest service.

Dropping and Carrying Your Burden

My favorite Zen story is the one about the old Zen monk who has spent many years in meditation.

He had attained deep levels of peace but had never achieved that moment of enlightenment when the I and the other collapse into one. So he asked his master, “Please grant me permission to leave the monastery and go practice on the great mountain by myself. There is nothing I want more than to realize the true nature of my non-dual self”

The master, sensing that his student’s time has come, granted permission. Well, our old monk took his begging bowl and few meager possessions in hand and began the journey to the mountains. It took a while, but he finally left the last village behind and began his ascent of the great mountain. Just then he saw coming toward him, down the mountain, an old man with a very large bundle on his back. The old man of course was none other than Manjushri—who, according to some Buddhist traditions, appears to aspirants to give them their last nudge toward enlightenment.

So said the old man going down to the old man going up, “Friend, tell me where you are going.” Well there was something about his voice that was kind, so the old monk told of his woe at being unable to cut through illusion and achieve illumination. “I’ve practiced for so many years...” His voice trailed away, and his eyes lowered. Suddenly however he raised his eyes and looked at the old man going down the great mountain. His face was shining and seemed so full of infinite compassion. “Tell me,” he entreated, “might you know something of enlightenment?” At this point the old man with the shining face abruptly let go of his bundle. It crashed to the ground... and the old monk instantly achieved enlightenment.

It would seem to be all about dropping the bundle that we carry with us—past, future, needs, obligations, fears, and even hopes. At this point the newly enlightened monk looks at the wise old man and asks a bit sheepishly. “Now what?” The old man smiles, picks up the bundle, and walks down the mountain.

The difference is true compassion. It is not that one hand is good to the other hand because there is a moral obligation. How silly. They are of the same body. Unity consciousness. Eros. Ethics. Healing. *Tikkun*. So it is with us. We need to let our bundles fall. Only to then pick them up again and walk down the mountain.