

SHAELOT:
[Questions]
Excerpt

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*Just to be is a blessing.
Just to live is holy*

--Abraham Heschel

Acknowledgments

a pebble burns... [Speak Out]; Sanctuary [Christian Science Monitor]; Rosh Hashanah [New Laurel Review]; Shofar [Jewish Spectator]; Psalm: You Have Not Made Anything New [Reconstructionist]; in the garden of self-denial [Jewish Roots]; the three mothers [Jewish Roots]; there are things we cannot change [Jewish Roots]; Hallel [Reconstructionist]; Here are [Speak Out]; On Tu B'Shevat [Shirim]; Shaked (Almond) [Midstream]; In Chains [Reconstructionist]; To the Egyptians [Reconstructionist]; Scores [Kamadehnu]; Zion [Wanderings]; There's an Old Midrashic Legend [Moment]; A Newer Version of an Older Legend [Comtemporary Quarterly]; Cold Turkey [Laurel Review]; United Nations [Voices International]; Existential Glue [A Different Drummer]; Terezin [Moving Out; Facets; Jewish Roots]; Hands: Sistine Chapel [Gryphon]; Above the Town [Reform Judaism]; The Echoes [Grypnon]; If He Carried a Cane [Kansas Quarterly]; Psalm: I Have Nothing But Praise [Fellowship in Prayer]; Psalm: Will My Arms [European Judaism]; Prayer [Cedar Rock Review]; Tithing [Jewish Currents]; So If We Really Are [Reconstructionist]; Sanctuary II [Osiris]; Akeda [Reconstructionist]; Invitation [Menorah]; Metaphysical Knot [Menorah]; Balancing [Menorah]; Zion [Wanderings]; Not Whether or Not but How [Midstream]; Ruth [Jewish Ledger]; Like My Mother Said [Jewish Ledger]; Psalm: Petition [Reconstructionist]

ANGST BETWEEN SEEING AND DOING
Pesach, 1987

**Let's stop at ANTIQUITIES
for a moment**

**just for a quick walk-through
since of course nothing's
new here and what we haven't seen
will only be repetition**

**same shelves of "Thou shalt"
"Thou shalt not"—
sections of "Behold," "Halleluyah"
the collections of "Amens"—**

Selah selah...

**How many times can one look at
"praise" in cloissene and ivories—
or "sanctified": urns
brooches
letter openers...**

**But I like it—
there's something nice about—
what? Paying homage?**

**Because after all
Where would we be if...
Where *are* we? Did we turn the
wrong corner? What happened
to the guards? Do you have a map?
Even this building seems wrong.**

**Didn't we come in at "Where wast thou?"
Or was it "Know before whom"—
through a gold arch--**

**Surely we're not lost.
Do you see an exit?
God knows we've been here
many times before...**

TISHRI

**Another year is gone
another harvest banked
against the openings;
time with its premonition
has once more driven off.**

**But inside we go on as if
nothing had changed. Voices,
gestures, everything the same**

**even acceptance—
so subtle who would suspect
having lived with it long
enough to easily be ignored.**

**But they and the lines will
eventually betray.**

**Lines with their blurred
Endings that once seemed
Fixed as all those points
Seen from a distance that
When finally reached run
out like the spool of resolves that
now in its un-
raveling is more knotted
than before.**

**Yet here are the vines
richly weighted
with tomorrow's wine
countering both
by commanding us
to pluck their fruit and
harvest it with
words of praise and
a special toast.**

SCORES

**of generations swarming
from the Book**

**hordes of suffering once more
setting up their soldiers**

**is it fair to have traveled all
these distances only to learn
we are no longer old enough to
find what we were looking for**

**is it just that we who
dragged ourselves the
continents should once more
be victimized by a childish fear**

**or is this our fate and this
Your decree
that we who burn to be
free must be chained to our
Creator**

**that we, willed to return
will never touch the hands
and heart that
committed us**

MEZUZAH

The sign says the building is
condemned but I'm already
inside trapped in the
elevator speeding past
numberless floors

never leveling long enough
to see through the grate or
bang on the door.

Trapped by birth or choice—
does anyone know when the
past is ripped up
evidence gone
with no one to ask
but the ghost of my loins?

Trapped by a 3-pronged tongue
fireless flame
paper remnant dangling
from my neck on a
tarnished chain.

A piece of skin
a scrap of pain
with a voice inside:
"Speak My Name!"

as if speech could mend
a broken heart
and make this ride
a childish game.

TITHING

**Upstairs Deborah is practicing
her flute. Over and over
a difficult run that
she's determined to master**

**and in the room next door
Naomi is taking the pulse of her
Teddy Bear, placing a compress
on his burning head:**

**one day she says she'll nurse the
sick, feed the poor, write
braille books.**

**Downstairs in my studio
fields of wheat are
ripening in the sun and
I'm picking grapes
in my vineyard
harvesting apples and
plums:**

**my tithing
this keyboard
the stack of paper and
line-up of pens...**

a pebble burns beneath the multitudes

**words
are God's pebbles
worn smooth**

**in the dawns first opening
images are learned**

**by eyes
reciting**

SANCTUARY

**I don't know how I came to be here
except that I was brought
by someone older**

**or someone who'd been here before
and thinking it important
to bring me too
took my hand.**

**Never telling me
Even then who he was; for I was
simply to know by the
warmth and the grip.**

**So young I was
so curious! But I never let on
and even though
slow to return anything but fear,
I felt it. I felt it there
and never let go.**

REACHING

**the head
when it first uncurls
is overlarge
as if by nature overindulged
and so by nature naturally self-
indulgent**

**so it is with the leaf
in seeking sun
unfolding to enormous
surfaces
every seed
greedily sucking light
from light's sustenance
till light takes hold**

**in God's grove
the sun is only a seedling
and on the tree of life
you and I only leaves
whose greed is infant surety
in the opening beyond
the climb is a
higher thrust**

a greater light

**we are the echoes
the refugees of echoes**

**gingerly we pick among the shards
pretending to search**

**but we're fooling no one
there's no one to fool**

**even the ghetto is a hideous dream
and the nation so long we have
longed for is finally a young heifer
growing into its own**

**yet where have we gone
and what is our promise
we who sit here praying not for prayers
but for miracles**

**we who call to the Unknown
only to mock It when It comes**

**or is the mockery only despair
the shawl we wrap around us
because we must**

**take away your echoes
we say
talking to you as if you were listening**

**find another place for them
another time
put them back in their boxes
bury them or
carry them so high
we will never hear them
even when they fall**

**they fall from us
still-born
they rise before us
standing on the mountains
like statues**

**standing on the mountains
and calling**

THE ECHOES ARE BACK

but their shells have been smashed

**they lie on the street
deaf to the hordes
shouting war shouting peace**

**dumb to the wheels
the thousands of feet—**

**like yesterday's jellyfish
washed up on the beach**

**mute cries
mere figures of speech**

RUTH

**Was there a blinding flash
a flaming vision or
only your longing that had
planted itself in the
loins of your loss
breeding these words that
now emerged as if by command**

**and opened before you
this Promised Land.**

**Words from which you could no more
run than stay rooted—**

**On wings they
flew from you**

**seeding the firmament
with thousands of hands.**

TERIZIN

**The young girl is floating skyward
the smoke circling her head
in perfect curls**

**flames leaping from her shoulders
lifting her like wings
until suddenly she seems to
turn in the light**

**and as the light opens
she opens her arms**

HANDS: SISTINE CHAPEL

**why are they so quick to undo
why so grasping
why unreal
touching
when they cannot feel
or feeling too much
the feeling dies
just at the point of the
meeting**

**you'd think they'd stop
clapping
when there's no one
to hear**

**or at least stop clasping
when no one
is there**

things we can't change
like words
the grafting and cutting
off
one name diffusing into
another
same refusals feeding the
same tumor

forgotten roots belonging
to another
rage a rare wound
opening and reopening the
ancient curse that has bred
this angry confusion

but god is older now and
has given up all proof
that anything was meant to
be the same or
different

STONES

**are often the only circumstance
faces painted to look
alive at the
final rite for relatives who
never gather
except for death**

**names engraved on
bone-white cards
strangers to the event
of themselves celebrating
the right to be
resurrected in fresh-
turned earth and
at the anniversary
each year with
a pebble carefully
placed**

**who are these relatives
but infants of
ourselves washed over
by time's indifference
nature's intaglio
arrested by the
artist's embrace**

**expression of our own
self-spirited destiny
tossed out to bounce the
waves or serve as
player for marked-out
squares of an
ancestral game**

NOT WHETHER OR NOT BUT HOW

After Abraham Heschel

God is not perfect.
Otherwise He would have created us
undoubting. He would not have trapped
Moses on that mountain just
long enough to make us sin
forcing him down again only to
smash those Laws. Nor would he have
held up over us merely a mountain
knowing for *that* we would
never give in.

Jeremiah said
if you fear your people you will
fail before them
and I think that's why God fears no one
and why man
fearing Him
always falls short of the mark—

then of course God driving over
as if He'd always been there.

So there seems to be a deception here
that we should know about:
we mortals living just long enough to
uncover it while He goes on
unending

giving us nothing but illusions
like the 7-branched candelabra when
viewed from the front: infinite attributes
to be witnessed as one.

Maybe if once a year only
We considered Him perfect—
believing it—
then maybe He too will believe:--

and surprising us

**with a miracle
somehow forgive.
RETURN**

**hidden from sight
the visions**

**yet the little event
tells all**

**fission of a molecule
premonitions of pain**

who can ignore

**yet it's not what changes bring
that illuminates**

**or even what happens
as if it should**

**but something else
far more real**

**where now burns in its place
a candle**

**something lost
that's just been returned**

**division's wax
revision's game**

SHOFAR

**In the blast of the New Year
we make promises
we stand before the throne
shining repentant undone
we stand alone**

**In the blast of the New Year
a new world opens
and into it as if by the strength
of a single utterance
the walls crumble**

**readiness appears
an ensign newly charged
charging us to hear the call**

Teki'ah
could we not run

Shevorim
**syllables too smooth
to imitate
the harshness
of the horn**

Teru'ah
readiness too willing

**and then repeated
Teki'ah ge-do-lah
the largeness stretching forth from a single breath
until the breath breaks
and the note dies**

**as if it too had been bound
to its own imperfection
yet given no choice
but to try again**

**this orb
turning helplessly
in the hollowness of its throat**

as it sends froth
its great golden echo

AKEDA*

**Tell me ran
who brought you here
how were you trapped**

**did you wander too far
or maybe too near
or mistaking the voice of
your shepherd
leaping after another**

**Or was it you ram
who called out
you yourself
who bound up your legs
and issued the command**

**you
this horn
this throat
these trembling hands--?**

***AKEDA is the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, the sacrifice of Abraham's only son, that did not occur. Instead, a ram appeared in the thicket just as Abraham was about to lay Isaac on the fire. This story is read on the day of Rosh Hashanah as the Torah portion of the High Holyday service.**