

Psalm 51: 11-3 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your holy Spirit from me. Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit. (49)

Introduction

I was diagnosed with Dyslexia as a young girl. I didn't read "right". From what I recall, letters jumped places, words flipped about, the sentences moved to their own beat—every written page was a gymnastics competition and those words were gold medalists. The diagnosis strapped me with insecurities about my intelligence and a disdain for reading. According to the diagnosis, I didn't have the potential to read well because I was a "bad" reader, so I didn't read. So, I lived into the idea that I wasn't a "reader. My act of reading exposed my I didn't have the potential to read well. In our performance and production driven economy, it's the actuality of the act that is esteemed. I wasn't a reader because my actions demonstrated that I wasn't.

Referring to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: this is what is known as actuality having priority over possibility. Aristotle's ontological priority of actuality over possibility equates to the simple equation: yet v. not-yet. "Yet" being more important than "not-yet"; "not yet" means nothing if it is never actualized into "Yet". Even though the actual is derived from the possible (the "yet" from the "not yet"), the possible strives toward the actual (like a seed striving to become actualized as a plant).¹ For Aristotle, actuality is both origin and goal of the possible, thus the possible serves and is subordinate to that actual.²

In that possibility serves actuality, actuality has primary position over possibility. Actuality is preferred and determines what the possibility was. So, we can say: one wasted their potential by not realizing it *into* actuality. *Oh, she had so much potential!* we say of people who have made "bad choices." (As if potential can be "wasted" away if it's not acted on.) The smart student who gets Ds also gets the obligatory look of disappointment. There *was* potential but it was never actualized as act; thus the potential is inferior in value to the actual and rendered as pointless apart from action.

But what if Aristotle was wrong?

¹ The quotation is from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* "(2) In time it is prior in this sense: the actual which is identical in species though not in number with a potentially existing thing is prior to it. I mean that to this particular man who now exists actually and to the corn and to the seeing subject the matter and the seed and that which is capable of seeing, which are potentially a man and corn and seeing, but not yet actually, so are prior in time; but prior in time to these are other actually existing things, from which they were produced. For from the potentially existent the actually existing is always produced by an actually existent thing, e.g. man from man, musician by musician; there is always a first mover, and the mover already exists actually. We have said in our account of substance that everything that is produced is something produced from something and by something, and that the same in species as it" 1049b 19-28.

² Eberhard Jüngel "Possibility". 99-100. Referring to Aristotle: "So actuality is the origin and goal of all that comes into being, and possibility exists for the sake of actuality. Possibility stands in teleological relation to actuality."

Jeremiah 31-34

“The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jer 31:31, 33)

Jeremiah prophesies about a new covenant God will make between God and God’s people. This new covenant will, according to Jeremiah, “...not be like the covenant that I [God] made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke...” (Jer 31). According to Jeremiah, it is not the fault of the content of the previous covenant, but the fault of the people:³ they are unable to perform according to the covenant established on the far side of the Red Sea as they stood in the shadow of Mt. Sinai receiving the revelation of the law, *Torah*.⁴ Leaving the *Torah* outside of the people as words carved in stone—as a thing to be actualized out of human possibility—was failing. The command to love God imparted to the stones, needed to be imparted to the hearts of the people.⁵ The people needed the actual to manifest the possible.

In Deuteronomy the great *Shema* of chapter 6 is the heart of Jewish liturgy. The word *shema* means: to hear so deeply that you do.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (6:4-9)

While Israel promised that they would obey this and other commands they received from God, they didn’t. This didn’t render the Torah, the revelation of the Law, in error or wrong; rather, it exposed a deeper and bigger issue: a human inability to hear so well and so deeply that love

³ JPS Study Bible Marvin A. Sweeney “Jeremiah” Eds Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler Jeremiah 31:31 New York, NY: OUP 2004 “The *new covenant* has been interpreted by Christians as a prophecy of the new covenant though Jesus (New Testament means new covenant), but here it refers to the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile and the reconstruction of the Temple. According to this passage, it is not the content of the new covenant which will be different, but how it is learned.”

⁴ Exodus 19:1ff

⁵ JPS Study Bible Jeremiah 31:33-34 “God places the *Teaching*, i.e., the Torah, in the *inmost being* or heart of the people so that the covenant cannot be broken again. This idea is developed in later Lurianic kabbalah, which maintains that all persons have a divine spark within. Since it is so inscribed, there will be no need for the Torah to be taught.”

comes forth. (The possibility of doings wasn't manifesting into act.) In Dt 10,⁶ God commands Israel to circumcise the foreskin of their hearts so that they obey God's commands. But then, in Dt 30, Moses prophesies God's promise that God will circumcise their hearts so that they will love God as they should.⁷ The people needed the actual to manifest the possible.

Jeremiah is picking up on that promise. God is going to act on the inner life of Israel so that the love of God and of God's people is written on their hearts of flesh rather than on tablets of stone. Relying on manifested human potential as act wasn't working. Jeremiah stands in solidarity with God in God's passionate zeal for God's beloved people and creation.⁸ He is filled with the divine pathos hearing God's voice and feeling God's love and heralds to the people this new promise: God will act not only on behalf of but also *in* God's people. God will act on and in the people in a way that will create possibility for obedience to love; God will manipulate actuality, parting space like water and stopping time like the rains of the heavens and create room for the possible. Jeremiah exhorts and encourages, *Shema, O Israel!*

No longer will Israel have to wrestle with the inner failure of potential failing to become actual, with hearts that listen but do not truly hear. Rather, they will be caught in the divine activity that is oriented toward possibility. When God sweeps in and moves God's people, in that

⁶ Deuteronomy 10:12-22, "¹²So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God^[c] and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. ¹⁴Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, ¹⁵yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. ¹⁶Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. ¹⁷For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. ²²Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven."

⁷ ⁶Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. ⁷The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you. ⁸Then you shall again obey the LORD, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, ⁹and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

⁸ Abraham J. Heschel *The Prophets* New York, NY: JPS, 1962. 25 "The prophet is not a mouthpiece, but a person; not an instrument, but a partner, an associate of God. Emotional detachment would be understandable only if there were a command which required the suppression of emotion, forbidding one to serve God 'with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might.' God, we are told, asks not only for 'works,' for action, but above all for love, awe, and fear. We are called upon to 'wash' our hearts (Jer. 4:14), to remove 'the foreskin' of the heart (Jer. 4:4), to return with the whole heart (Jer. 3:10). 'You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart' (Jer. 29:13). The new covenant which the Lord will make with the house of Israel will be written upon their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34)."

actuality there is possibility. Thus, we say with confidence: *with God all things are possible*. God acts in our time and space, in our material realm and makes room for things that were not but now can be. In God's economy it is not that possibility serves actuality, that potential serves act, but the opposite: actuality serves possibility, act serves potential, and the possible has primacy over what is actual.

Conclusion

It was in high school, during the later half of Junior year, where I wanted to receive untimed testing for the SATs. I was, as the test concluded in elementary school, dyslexic. My guidance councilor thought it was a good idea, but I had to be tested first before I'd be granted untimed testing. So, I sat for a test. A week later I sat with the examiner as she gave me my results. She explained before she went over my test that the test answers are scored on a scale of 1-14, 14 being the highest number and 1 being the lowest. The higher the score, the less a need for untimed testing. She opened my results and showed me a list of 14s and 12s with a 10 here and there. She laughed kindly, *I'm sorry, there's no way I can recommend an untimed test with these high scores*. I was baffled. *Where did my dyslexia go?* I asked. *Apparently, your brain fixed it*, she replied. Becoming a good reader had nothing to do with "potential" made "actual" but about actuality making space and time for the possibility of being a good reader.

We take the actual and make it the final because we are taken with our deeds and actions as the final verdict of who we are as human beings on this planet; we've believed the lie that actuality has priority over possibility. We put too much stock in actions as determinant of who and what a person is. And this means we are focused on the past that we miss the divine activity of the future right in front of us for us.⁹ We get wrapped up in what *is*, we miss what *could be*. What *is* isn't all there is. And what *is* allows us the creativity and imagination to dream of what isn't yet. As those encountered by God in the event of faith, we are people of possibility rather than only actuality. Here in lies our hope. A pandemic has disrupted or what *is*; so, what *could be*? Where can we go from here? Can we dare to be people who face the anti-Asian racism plaguing this land, that eight lives were taken for no other reason than hate? Can our society meet the survival needs of people who find themselves stuck between two choices, work or don't work, where both end in death? Can our society fight for the lives of Black, Indigenous people of color? Can our society become a safe place for people to be who they are, what they are, and love those whom they love freely?

What we have now doesn't have to be what we have tomorrow; what we're accustomed to isn't all there is. Possibility has priority over actuality. There's more than what the eye can see. Because sometimes the man on the donkey is a divine king in disguise and a state sanctioned instrument of death becomes a tool for the victory of life. For the beloved, what *is* isn't all there is.

⁹ Heschel *Prophets* 211 "Here, knowledge is not the same as thought, comprehension, gnosis or mystical participation in the ultimate essence. Knowledge of God is action toward man, sharing His concern for justice; sympathy in action. Inner identification with God's will and concern is the goal of the new covenant..."