

All through the season of teshuva, compassion and justice exist in tension. The blessing of holiness, the קדושה, emphasizes God as King - המלך הקדוש. The weekday blessing about justice changes. Usually we say מלך אוהב צדקה ומשפט - God is the king who loves righteousness and justice; during the past week we've said המלך המשפט - God is the king of justice. And yet, during the weekday shacharit and mincha, we sing אבינו מלכנו - the poem which somehow manages the tricky balancing act between gracious loving kindness and justice.

**Justice is complicated.** Over the years, there have been plenty of well-meaning people who have tried to frame justice as something black and white, something straightforward, a simple matter of calling balls and strikes. Justice, it turns out, is a vast library's worth of books which, over the centuries, have stirred up heated arguments among social scientists, philosophers, theologians.

**We believe in justice** - sounds simple; but that outer layer of casual confidence with which we profess our beliefs just might crack when we're shaking between the rock and the hard place. Today on a day when we remember souls that are dear to us, on a day when those special candles are burning, I share with you a Jewish folktale from Afghanistan, called **The Cottage of Candles**.

There was once a Jew who went out into the world to seek justice. Somewhere, he was certain, true justice must exist, he had never found it. So he set out on a quest that lasted for many years. He went from town to town and village to village, and he searched for justice, but never did he find it.

Many years passed, until the man had explored all the known world except for one last, great forest. And in he went - without hesitation, for by now he was fearless, and he went everywhere in it. He entered the caves of thieves, but they mocked him, and said, "Do you expect to find justice here?" And he went into the huts of witches, but they laughed at him and said, "Do you expect to find justice here?" Undeterred, he went deeper and deeper into that forest, until at last he arrived at a little clay hut. Through the window he saw many flickering flames, and he was curious about them. So he went to the door and knocked. No answer. He knocked again. Nothing. At last he pushed the door open and stepped inside. As soon as he stepped inside that cottage, he realized that it was much larger on the inside than it had seemed to be from the outside.

It was filled with hundreds of shelves, and on every shelf there were dozens of oil candles. Some of those candles were in precious holders of gold or silver or marble; others were in cheap holders of clay or tin. And some of the holders were filled with oil and the flames burned brightly, while others had very little oil left. All at once an old man, with a long, white beard, wearing a white robe, appeared before him. **“Shalom Aleichem, my son,” how can I help you?”** The man replied, “Aleichem shalom. I have searched all over this world for justice, but never have I seen anything like this. What are all these candles about?” “Each of these candles is the candle of a person’s soul. As long as the candle burns that person remains alive. But when the flame burns out that person’s soul takes leave of this world.” The seeker asked, “Can you show me the candle of my soul?” “Follow me,” the old man said, and he led him through that endless labyrinth of a cottage. At last they reached a low shelf. There the old man pointed to a candle in a clay holder and said, “That is the candle of your soul.”

Now the man took one look at that flickering candle, and a great fear fell upon him, for the wick of that candle was very short, and there was very little oil left. It looked as if at any moment the wick would slide into the oil and sputter out. He began to tremble. Could the end be so near without his knowing it? Then he noticed the candle next to his own, also in a clay holder, **but that one was full** of oil, and its wick was long and straight, its flaming burned brightly. “Whose candle is that?” he asked. “I can only reveal each person’s candle to that that very person,” the old man said, as he turned and left.

The man stood there, quaking. All at once he heard a sputtering sound, and when he looked up, he saw smoke rising from another shelf, and he knew that somewhere, someone was no longer among the living. He looked back at his own candle and saw that there were only a few drops of oil left. Then he looked again at the candle next to his own, so full of oil, **and a terrible thought entered his mind.** He stepped back and searched for the old man in every corner of the cottage, but he couldn’t find him anywhere. He picked up the candle next to his own and lifted it up above his own. At that instant the old man appeared out of nowhere and gripped his arm with a grip like iron, and he said, “Is **this** the kind of justice you are seeking?” The seeker closed his eyes because it hurt so much.

And when he opened his eyes, he saw that the old man was gone, and the cottage and the candles had all disappeared. He found himself standing alone in the forest and he heard the trees **whispering his fate**. And he wondered, had his candle burned out? Was he, too, no longer among the living?

**Was it all a dream?** The seeker never really searched **himself** until he entered the dark forest; and **what if each of us** is the seeker for justice. We carry around fixed, unexamined beliefs about justice, we consider ourselves just and fair-minded - and - in the critical moments of desperation or confusion, our ideas of justice yield to fear or anger, some powerful emotion that holds us in an iron grip which you can feel - in between the words of ונתנה תוקף; who by fire, who by water, who will live a full life and whose will be lost in their prime? We cry out אל תשליכנו מלפניך - Don't cast us off, don't abandon us! The language of the service is intended to shake us from the folly of our self-assured daydream of being in charge, of being so sure that we know the answers. Let's listen in on a radio conversation (released by the Chief of Naval Operations no less) of a US naval ship with Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October 1995.

CANADIANS: "Please divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision"

AMERICANS: "Recommend YOU divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision"

CANADIANS: "Negative. You will have to divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision"

AMERICANS: "This is the captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course"

CANADIANS: "No, I say again, you divert your course"

AMERICANS: "This is the Aircraft Carrier USS LINCOLN, the second largest ship in the United States Atlantic Fleet. We are accompanied with three Destroyers, three Cruisers and numerous support vessels. I DEMAND that you change your course 15 degrees north. I say again, that's one-five degrees north, or counter-measures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship"

CANADIANS: "This is a LIGHTHOUSE. Your call"

**On** יום הדין, **this Day of Judgement**, when we honestly evaluate our words and deeds of this past year, the prayers are a shining beacon from a lighthouse. It is not too late. But time is short: Are we blanketed by a fog of delusion, or have we opened our eyes and our hearts? Are **we** ready to change course?