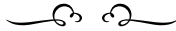


Blue Fringe



Praying on the Beach

DAN ORNSTEIN

Some time ago, I was preparing to *daven* Shaḥarit early one morning while standing by water's edge on a beautiful Florida beach. The sun rose over the horizon like a fiery orange globe. The endless expanse of ocean rolled on before me, its waves and the world beneath them filled with life and the mysteries of life's origins. Behind me rose a row of ultra-swank hotels, each one's ghastly colored facade uglier and gaudier than the next. Even at seven in the morning, there were already hundreds of people jogging, gabbing with each other, and walking with coffee in hand along the boardwalk behind me. But on the beach itself at such an early hour it was just me. I was all alone.

Alone is often a state of mind, and truly alone is precisely how I felt as I wrapped myself in my *tallit* and *t'fillin* and began to recite Birkhot Ha-shaḥar, the early morning blessings of the *siddur*. I was oblivious to the possible stares and befuddlement of beachwear-clad passers-by who might see me in my strange prayer garb from a distance. As I tried talking to God in my davening, my mind wandered helplessly back and forth between the *keva*—the fixed text of the *siddur*'s words that I could recite by rote—and the awe-inspiring setting of the ocean that can produce almost instant *kavvanah*, the spiritual expressiveness and spontaneity that we strive for in prayer.

Then I saw him. He was likely in his mid-twenties, though the heavy black parka in which he huddled with the hood over his head made him look older. Thick black sneakers with the laces untied came up above his ankles. He seemed not the least bit aware of me or disturbed that he was dressed for upstate New York in February while around us a clear, seventy-five-degree day was dawning. I was instantly repelled by him. Inferring from

his dress that he was homeless and from his demeanor that he was mentally ill, I was overtaken by some primal fears for my safety. Almost instinctively, I began to plan how I was going to flee if he approached me. Having encountered my share of mentally ill homeless people when I lived in New York City, some of whom were violent, I decided that it was in my best interests to avoid eye contact entirely and to move away from him quickly. And then, as I felt the panic rising, my mother's voice—of all things—suddenly broke like sunlight through the cloud of terror and distraction inside my head: "Don't run away from him or mistreat him. For all you know, he could be Elijah the prophet, here to herald the coming of the *mashi-ah*." All laughter aside at the absurdity of the situation, I wasn't really surprised that her advice popped into my head just then. From time to time since my childhood years, she has reminded me and my siblings of that ancient Jewish folk-teaching that anyone at all can be a messenger sent by God to bear a specific message to any one of us personally, even an anonymous homeless man walking the beach dressed for a blizzard.

I didn't run away. I stayed to watch him lie down in the sand, oblivious to me and the rest of humanity, as the ocean wind swirled gently around us both. We were maybe twenty feet apart, both of us wholly out of sync with the world, yet just as wholly separated from each other by our radically different fortunes in life. I was a privileged, middle class man enjoying God's sunshine while wearing Bermuda shorts and a *tallit*. He was a homeless man, clothed in the frightening, winter-dark colors of mental illness. My heart opened to this person whom I did not know, whom I would never befriend, and whose life I could not imagine myself being able to change. Heeding my mother's instructions, I allowed my compassion to trump my fear. I began to weep as I thought about the fragile yet persistent bond of humanity drawing us together as God's children. My mother's voice faded, and as it did, I imagined God responding to my prayers from somewhere deep within: "Is your heart breaking for this man?" "Yes," I answered between sobs. "Good," God said, "now you can begin to pray."

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