

## Peter's Newsletter

March 2009

### The Holy Land, Part Two: Sacred and Profane



*Banyas Creek, a source of the River Jordan*

Some months ago when I mentioned to a friend of mine—a physician who had lived in India until he was twelve—that I would be going on a tour of the Holy Land, he responded with mock confusion. “The Holy Land? Where’s that?” As I lamely started to explain what seemed obvious to me, he broke in to set me straight. “Oh, you mean *your* holy land.” Then he laughed to let me know he was just making a friendly point. I was talking to someone born and raised in a country of well over one million square miles, all of which is considered holy land by its more than one billion native inhabitants. That got me thinking about what on earth we mean by the Holy Land anyway. The Americas were and are considered sacred turf to their native inhabitants, now largely displaced. Yet the people we also call Indians, the Native Americans, never needed to erect great shrines, temples or churches to feel moved by the holiness of the land they

inhabited. As a result, benighted European invaders saw the indigenous peoples essentially as heathens. That word, incidentally, traces its roots to a 4<sup>th</sup>-century bishop of the Goths named Ulfilas, who translated the Bible into Gothic, and applied the term heathen to any nation or people who did not worship the God of Israel. In other words, pagans.

This antagonism on the part of those who worship the incarnation of God who died and was miraculously reborn (Christians), toward those who worship the earth and its resident spirits, based in large part on the miracle of agricultural death and rebirth (pagans, or almost all indigenous peoples), seems odd beyond reason. But you can learn a lot about societal prejudices from the history of language. “Pagan” was a back-formation by the early Christians to refer to anyone who wasn’t a Christian. The Latin word *paganus* means nothing more blasphemous than a peasant, someone who lives in the country (the same root gave us the French *paysage*, countryside, and Italian *paesano*, countryman). As we know, the Christian bias against pagans had to do with their worship of deities intimately connected with nature, or of Nature itself. Throughout the Roman Empire at that time, this meant the vast majority of the population. Romans and Greeks appear to have divined the mystical essence of nature in a way that today we would consider quintessentially spiritual.

There’s a further coded message in the Christian contempt for pagans, or “country” folk, and their shameless love of nature and celebration of the body. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Christianity was made the religion of Rome by the Emperor Constantine, it had already been infiltrated by a Manichaean sense of duality that saw the body as evil and spirit as good. Although the Manichaean heresy was later officially deplored by the church, its strict dualistic beliefs were paradoxically absorbed into Christianity. One of the key Manichaean beliefs is that there is no omnipotent good power, but instead two equal and opposite powers. Each human is a battleground for these powers: the good part is the soul, composed of light, and the bad part is the body, composed of dark earth. The soul defines us

and is incorruptible, according to this belief, but it is under the domination of a foreign power, which explains the problem of evil for followers of Manichaeism, a form of Gnosticism. Humans are said to be able to be saved from this power if they come to know who they are and identify themselves with their soul. But this, sadly, was predicated on a denial of the body.

And so it was refreshing in more ways than one to discover, in the tiny land that gave birth to Christianity as well as Judaism, the ancient site of worship of a pagan deity. The nature god Pan, as it happens, isn't related etymologically to "pagan," but they seem to come together at a site north of the Sea of Galilee. Banyas, a name based on the Arabic pronunciation of what had been known for centuries as Paneas, is a lovely bucolic spot that encompasses a small spring and a tall limestone cliff with a modest waterfall. The weathered remnants of ancient columns and lovely stone niches carved out of the hillside, wanting only their statuary daemons, combine with the gently bubbling waters of the Banyas Creek to create a soul-satisfying refuge. After purchasing empty containers from the concession stand, we waded into the stream bed to collect "Holy Water from the Source of the Jordan." Technically, Banyas is one of three tributaries that source the River Jordan, but the site is as appealing as any in Israel, and once again bears a curious resemblance to the Catskill Mountains of New York.

The history of Banyas is as variegated and multilayered as the entire Holy Land. It is located near the foot of Mount Hermon, where the snowmelt from the mountain flows underground and surfaces within a cave at the base of a high limestone cliff. This water formed one of the biggest springs in the Middle East, feeding into the Banyas River (also known as the Hermon River), and was first settled in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE in the wake of Alexander's conquests that spread Greek civilization throughout the region. Worship of the Greek Pan here superseded the Canaanite local deity, a version of Baal. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE the Ptolemies built a cult center, but it was eventually occupied by the Seleucids and later annexed to the Kingdom of Herod the Great, builder of Masada,

Caesarea, the Herodion, and other locations discussed in my previous newsletter. In the year 2 BCE, his son and successor Herod Philip II founded a pagan city and named it Caesarea Philippi, in honor of Augustus and to distinguish it from his father's coastal city of Caesarea, which we had visited earlier. Following the Muslim conquest in the 7th century, Paneas became Banyas, because the Arabic alphabet lacks a "p." The Crusaders took their turn in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and in more recent times it was occupied by the British, French, Australians, Syrians, and, finally, Israelis.

Pan is a rather mysterious figure, even by mythological standards. He was originally said to inspire sudden fear in lonely places, from which the word *panic* derives. Following the Titans' assault on Olympus, Pan claimed credit for the victory of the gods, because he had inspired disorder and fear in the attackers; and in the Battle of Marathon, Pan was believed to have favored the Athenians, and so stimulated panic in the hearts of their enemies, the Persians. Later, of course, Pan was known primarily for his music, capable of arousing inspiration, sexuality, or panic, depending on his intentions. The prototypical "pan flute" with which he is associated came about as a result of Pan's pursuit of Syrinx, a lovely water nymph of Arcadia, daughter of the river god. Refusing to hear his compliments, Syrinx fled and sought the help of her sister nymphs, who instantly changed her into a hollow reed. The god, still infatuated but unsure of which reed she had become, cut seven (or nine) pieces, joined them in decreasing lengths and formed the musical instrument bearing the name syrinx, or pan-pipes.

(Today the word syrinx refers to the vocal organ of birds.)

Pan has the hindquarters, legs, and horns of a goat, much like a faun or satyr, and combines a sense of wild riotousness with music and animal sexuality. Visiting the bucolic Banyas today, where a temple, grotto, courtyards, and niches



for statues devoted to Pan stood through the Greek and Roman eras, it isn't hard to understand why the place was associated with a god of shepherds and flocks, mountain wilds, hunting and rustic music.

Yet the overwhelming sensation I felt in that divine setting was tranquility and the appropriateness of our bodily incarnation. The Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön has written insightfully of the value of being in the body, contrary to what some Christians and Buddhists sometimes suggest.

It is helpful to realize that being here, sitting in meditation, doing simple everyday things like working, walking outside, talking with people, eating, using the toilet, is actually all that we need to be fully awake, fully alive, fully human. It's also helpful to realize that this body that we have, this very body that's sitting here right now in this room, this very body that perhaps aches, and this mind that we have at this very moment, are exactly what we need to be fully human, fully awake, and fully alive. Furthermore, the emotions that we have right now, the negativity and the positivity, are what we actually need. It is just as if we looked around to find out what would be the greatest wealth that we could possibly possess in order to lead a decent, good, completely fulfilling, energetic, inspired life, and found it all right here.

As I was writing this newsletter, I came across an elegant tribute to the late Albert Hofmann, the Swiss research chemist with Sandoz who first synthesized what is commonly known as LSD. Although Hofmann was an astute, disciplined scientist, he was no Philistine, hanging out and corresponding with the likes of Aldous Huxley and Allen Ginsberg. With his wife Hofmann journeyed to Mexico to experience the "magic mushrooms" of the Mazatecas, from which he synthesized psilocybin. The Hofmann piece was written by the great American novelist Robert Stone, whom I interviewed for one of my books, and who knows a thing or two about the value of creative intoxication. Stone, an agnostic (at least, he was the

last time I spoke with him), makes an important connection between Hofmann's scientific curiosity about consciousness expansion, certain ancient religious rites, and a love of the natural world. "As a scientist," Stone writes of Dr. Hofmann, "he was fascinated by the ritual practiced by the ancient Greeks at Eleusis each fall. These rites, honoring the grain goddess Demeter, celebrated antiquity's most profound mystery cult. Initiates described an intense life-changing experience in the course of the nighttime ceremonies. Hofmann believed that one of the components of the sacred *kykeon*, the potion distributed to adepts, was a barley extract containing ergot," from which LSD can be derived. Hofmann took LSD many times and apparently developed a personal mysticism involving nature, for which he had a lifelong passion, and derided the Western drive for material satisfaction that resulted in an alienation from the outdoors. The use of LSD made Hofmann increasingly conscious of the beauty and necessity of nature, in which he saw "a miraculous, powerful, unfathomable reality." He would have loved Banyas.

### **Tzfat: City on a Hill**

Not so far south and west of Banyas lies one of the four holiest cities of Israel, named Safed, also spelled Tzfat, among other transliterations, and generally pronounced *svaht*. (The other three cities are Jerusalem, Hebron, and Tiberias). One could easily spend several days in this mountaintop center associated with Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, but we had only a few hours near the end of an already long day of travel. Nonetheless, according to some unfathomable law of cosmic economy, so much seemed to happen there that it has taken me several weeks to sort it out. First, a little history.

Like Banyas (and much of this region), the city of Safed has passed through many hands, having been controlled at times by Romans, Christian Crusaders, Muslims, Jewish Kabbalists, Palestinians, and the modern State of Israel. Some Biblical scholars declare that it was founded by a son of Noah, but historians

insist it was established in Roman times. Safed first appears in Jewish sources in the late Middle Ages, and is mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud as one of five elevated spots where fires were lit to announce the New Moon and festivals during the Second Temple period. In the 12th century, it was a fortified Crusader city known as Saphet. In 1266, the Mamluk sultan Baybars wiped out the Christian population and turned it into a Muslim town called Safat. After the Spanish Inquisition expelled the Jews from Spain in 1492, many prominent rabbis found their way to Safed, among them the renowned Kabbalists Isaac Luria and Moshe Kordovero, along with Yossef Caro, the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, considered the most authoritative compilation of Jewish law since the Talmud, and whose synagogue stands in the center of town.

Safed became a locus of Kabbalah and in 1578 staked another historical claim as the home of the first printing press in the Middle East. Today it commands views that sweep from Lebanon to the Sea of Galilee, and would have been prominently visible in the time of Christ, less than 30 kilometers northwest of Galilee. The great American Calvinist clergyman, abolitionist, and art patron Henry Ward Beecher wrote in his 1891 book *The Life of Jesus the Christ*, “It has been often proposed as the city set on a hill alluded to in the Sermon on the Mount.” There Jesus preached to the multitude, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14).



Safed/Tzfat's main drag is a winding cobblestone street whose woozy curves make the Beatnik havens of Manhattan's West Village seem prim by comparison, lined with art galleries and tchotchke shops. As we approached the entrance to the revered Yossef Caro Synagogue, it was flanked by two sights at once earthy and

spiritual. To the right of the front door a pushcart sold cups of fresh pomegranate juice for just a few shekels. The pomegranate is native to the region from Iran to the Himalayas of northern India, and has been cultivated and naturalized over the Mediterranean rim and the Caucasus since ancient times. Its high antioxidant content, including beta-carotene and polyphenols, catechins, gallic acid, and anthocyanins, is enough to jumpstart the weakest of immune systems, and the juice is refreshing to the taste buds as well. What's not to like? An Orthodox Jewish writer friend tells me that the fruit is believed to contain 613 seeds, the same number as the *mitzvot* that all Jews are bound to follow.

On the other side of the doorway loomed a large color poster, hardwired to the wrought-iron mesh that surrounded the entrance. The poster had been partially covered over with smaller fliers announcing prayer meetings in Hebrew, but rising above them, and directly beneath the painted face of Rabbi Caro, was the unmistakable visage of the great American jazz icon Charlie Parker playing his trademark alto saxophone. Parker's original nickname was "Yardbird," reputedly based on his love of chicken, although by a kind of sublime alchemical metamorphosis it was later shortened to "Bird," which better fitted his soaring, avian flights of sound, unlike anything of its time and place in jazz history, or, indeed, anywhere in the world. To discover that familiar face in this exotic center of Jewish mysticism many thousands of miles from 52<sup>nd</sup> St. and Harlem where Bird once reigned supreme was both anachronistic and thrillingly appropriate.

I later learned that in the 1950s and '60s, Safed was celebrated as Israel's art capital, and it established a hub of creativity that drew leading painters from around the country, such as Yosl Bergner, Moshe Castel and Menachem Shemi. Those may not sound like household names, but their work is still handled internationally by the likes of Sotheby's, and some examples I've seen, especially Shemi's, is magnificent in ways that recall both Chagall and Kandinsky in the same painting. During this period, Safed was also home to the country's top nightclubs, hosting the debut performances of Naomi Shemer, Aris San, and

other acclaimed singers. So by some magical concatenation of art and the spiritual, the image of Bird in full flight, perhaps a holdover from those culturally expansive times, adorned this mystical mountaintop synagogue without apparent contradiction.



Menachem Shemi, *Spring in Safed*, 1942

Excited, I called over my dear friend John Gunther, a jazz trumpet player in his own right and one of the most knowledgeable scholars of Midwestern jazz history I've ever encountered. (Although Parker made his name in New York's bebop hothouse, he cut his chops in Kansas City, where he was born, playing in the reed section of the Jay McShann Orchestra.) "You won't believe this, John," I said, "but look who's here." John seemed about to leave his body. "I feel a little disoriented," he said as he stared disbelieving at the poster. "I didn't know where I was for a minute." Bird can have that effect on devoted jazz lovers. Finding an image of Bird in one of the holiest sites in one of the sacred cities of Israel is what Carl Jung would have called synchronicity, a sign from the heavens, or at least the collective unconscious.



*Entrance to Yossef Caro Synagogue with Poster of Charlie Parker*

You may think I'm taking artistic and philosophical liberties if I say that Charlie Parker was to 20<sup>th</sup>-century music in general, and jazz in particular, what Kabbalah is to mainstream religions. Yet both represent the highest, most profound embodiment of systems of understanding and configuring Reality, such that it rises above what we call normative or consensus reality and sets its own standard. Years ago as I listened to reissues of recordings Bird made as part of the McShann Orchestra, I had a minor epiphany. McShann played essentially big band swing, Kansas City-style, but Parker is given a few solos on the LP. (Okay, this was back in the pre-digital era, but at least it wasn't a 78.) When Bird solos on those tracks, he sounds almost as if he's playing on a different record from the rest of the band, higher, faster, more ethereal. If you're not familiar with Charlie Parker or especially fond of jazz, then think of a John Garfield movie from the 1940s, in which Garfield, a product of the Group Theater, is so much more naturalistic than the film actors of his day that he seems to be in a different movie. Or consider Vincent, toiling in near-obscure while hoping to sell a rolled-up canvas of *The Starry Night* or *Irises* to pay for his paint and brushes, but finding no takers.

While our group toured the art galleries, I slipped into a café that offered a splendid view of the mountains. The proprietor had to be summoned from his upstairs loom, where he doubled as a weaver, to froth up a couple of cappuccinos, which my wife and I sipped contentedly while a vista that might have been painted by Nicholas Roerich floated below us. A Rabbi lecturing another tour group mentioned that the graves of many renowned Kabbalists were just a 20-minute walk from here, “and well worth the effort.” But we were transfixed and paradoxically short of time in this timeless place. Some kind of New Age Jewish music was playing and I asked the weaver-barrista if he knew the singer’s name. He kindly struggled to transliterate it into English, and directed me to a shop next door, where a young woman happily sold me the very CD in a plain plastic sheath for a mere 20 shekels, or about \$5. Although the label was in Hebrew, a search for the transliterated name turned up several CDs by Ovadia Hamama, and by listening to samples I determined that the one I bought is titled *Heaven and Earth (Shamaim Vearetz)*. The song that first caught my attention is called “Ana B’Koach,” but I didn’t discover until later that it is a Kabbalistic prayer of unknown authorship, traditionally attributed to Rabbi Nechunya ben HaKana, who lived in the first century. It consists of seven lines of six words each, the first letter of each word spelling out a secret divine name of God.

I had been following a course of Kabbalah study at home, and after we returned I continued where I had left off. One of the meditations on the CDs introduced what is called The Kabbalist’s Prayer—Ana B’Koach. The practice of this prayer involves scanning the characters (right to left) while saying or singing the words of the prayer and the 42-letter name of God. Several YouTube videos I discovered project both the Aramaic and an English transliteration that allows you to follow along and repeat the prayer in its original form. One video showed Hamama and his band singing the prayer, the same recording that was on the CD that I first heard in Tzfat, which made it easy to follow along because by then I had the melody engraved in my brain from many listenings to that album.

Okay, maybe it's just another synchronicity, but an aggressive, seductive one. And maybe my training as a jazz critic all those years ago made it easy for me to track down the source of that lovely music I was hearing while sharing a cappuccino with my wife and luxuriating in the view. All I thought I was doing at the time was buying an aural souvenir of a timeless moment. How could I know that it would shortly turn up in my spiritual studies? Whatever the chain of events, the result is that one of the most sacred prayers on earth will forever be connected to the beauty of those Roerichesque mountains and a moment of peace, with the Spirit of Bird hovering over all of us.



*View from a café in Tzfat*

We made many more stops on our journey, each uniquely compounded of layers of significance: historical, spiritual, sociological, physical. But taken together, Banyas and Tzfat represent a particular interplay of mysticism, nature, and spiritual community that characterizes the most profound states of spiritual awareness. Neither locale seemed exceptional at first glance, which is probably as it should be. They are there, almost unaware of what they are, but they make possible a deeper level of life and Light. Such things remind me of the Talmudic

teachings about the *lamed vovniks*, the thirty-six secret, righteous Jews in every generation who receive the Divine Presence and through whose merit the world continues to exist, even though they remain concealed from the rest of us.

Another source reckons the number at forty-five righteous: thirty in the Land of Israel and fifteen elsewhere, along with thirty hidden gentiles, upon whose merit the nations subsist. Maybe Charlie Parker was one of them.

The physician and author Rachel Naomi Remen tells of hearing about the thirty-six from her grandfather. “The story he told me is very old and dates from the time of the prophet Isaiah,” she writes. “In this story, God tells us that He will allow the world to continue as long as at any given time there is a minimum of thirty-six good people in the human race. People who are capable of responding to the suffering that is part of the human condition. . . . If at any time there are fewer than thirty-six such people alive, the world will come to an end. ‘Do you know who these people are, Grandpa?’ I asked, certain he would say ‘Yes.’ But he shook his head. ‘No,’ he told me, ‘only God knows who the Lamed-Vovniks are. Even the Lamed-Vovniks themselves do not know for sure the role they have in the continuation of the world, and no one else knows it either. They respond to suffering, not in order to save the world but simply because the suffering of others touches them and matters to them.’” (In this they resemble the Tibetan Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, Chenrezig, who in China evolved into Guan Yin, but whose Sanskrit name is Avalokiteshvara. According to some etymologies, that means “he hears the cries of those who need help.”

Remen concludes her remembrance this way. “It turned out that Lamed-Vovniks could be tailors or college professors, millionaires or paupers, powerful leaders or powerless victims. These things were not important. What mattered was only their capacity to feel the collective suffering of the human race and to respond to the suffering around them. And because no one knows who they are, anyone you meet might be one of the thirty-six for whom God preserves the world. It is important to treat everyone as if this might be so.”

(All photos by the author)

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