

Caught Between Justice and Mercy
by
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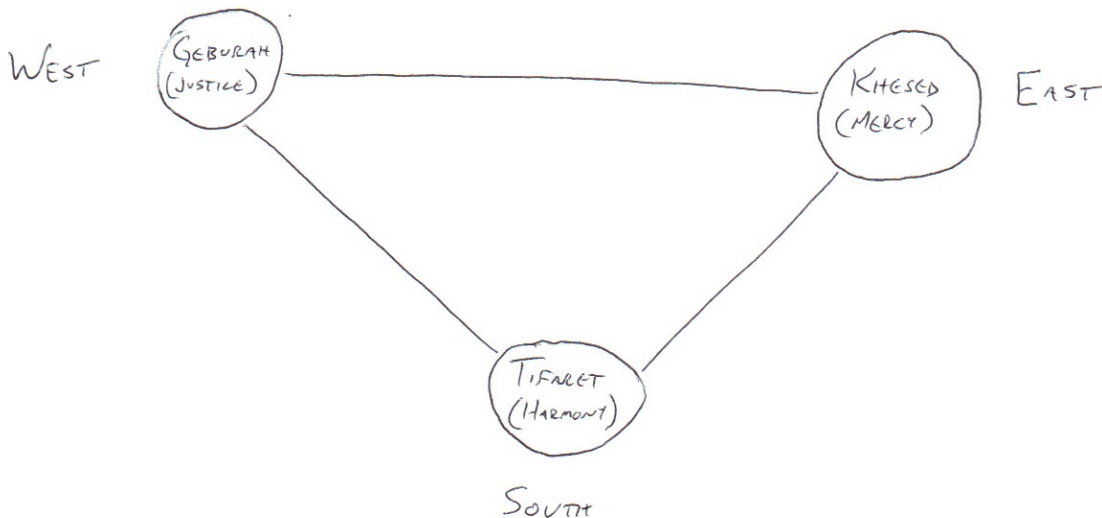
I have been thinking about topic number five, the two sephirot Khesed and Geburah, and which Working Tools relate to them and the lessons of this degree, for a few months now, unable to find the right insight around which to build a paper. Several ideas were milling around in my head, but they refused to engage one another and learn anything about each other, and so they remained ignorant of all they had in common, shuffling around nervously in my brain like middle school kids at a dance. When suddenly, in the most unlikely (yet somehow fitting) of places, I had my “aha moment” and the direction of my paper came clearly into view. To conclude my simile, it was as though the DJ had played the exact right song, and now the ideas were dancing with each other, talking and laughing as they discovered their previously unknown connections.

The epiphany itself came at church, as I was attending an Ash Wednesday service, marking the beginning of Lent. Our Rector, Father Bill, had begun the service by saying that the word Lent comes from the Old English, and means ‘to lengthen.’ Thus, this period of fasting and self-reflection, in the dark weeks of Winter, is when the days begin to lengthen and by the end of Lent, we have passed the Spring Equinox and the days are finally longer than the nights. The early Church Fathers latched onto this celestial happening and superimposed Easter (the “Coming of the Light”) on what for centuries had already been a festival of fertility and new life. (Hence, the strange symbol of the Easter egg.)

So, with the Masonic idea of moving from darkness to light already on the back burner of my consciousness, we began to read Psalm 103:8-14 together. I will reproduce verses 8-12 here, with the relevant passages in italics:

*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and of great kindness.
He will not always accuse us,
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our sins from us.*

By the time we reached the end of verse twelve, I had stopped reading aloud. I had too many thoughts in my head, chief among them the phrase, "As far as the east is from the west." Thinking of how far apart east and west are, I then went the other way and played with the notion that the midway-point between them was the south. Picturing the east, west, and south from above, as if in a diagram, I had my mind blown by the following correspondence.



Suddenly, with the stations in the lodge forming part of the kabalistic Tree of Life, it was crystal clear how the balance between mercy and justice leads to harmony, and which Working Tools one might use to achieve that balance.

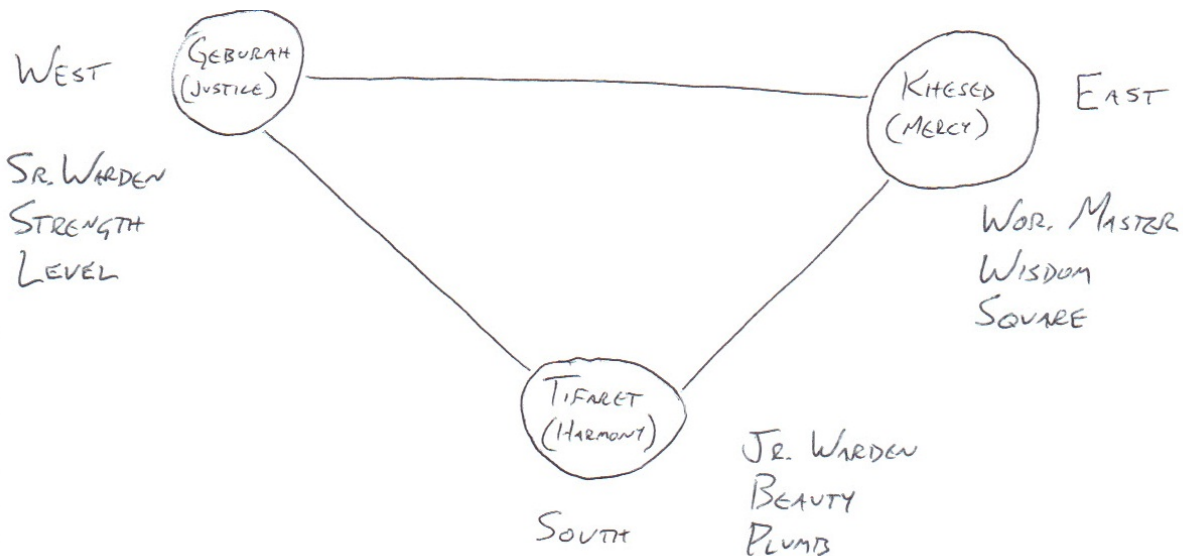
The two forces in question, Khesed (mercy) and Geburah (justice), are seemingly at odds with one another. Put in the most simple terms possible, when someone commits a crime or some other offense, the natural and normal reaction is to call for that person to be punished. The problem, however, is that often the heightened emotions of a situation in which someone feels victimized tend to blur the lines between justice...and revenge. We all want justice. That is, we all want the person to suffer a punishment or consequence. But sometimes what we want doesn't actually fit the crime. Sometimes true justice doesn't seem like enough, in which case revenge feels so much better! Isn't that sad?

In an attempt to stay away from politics or current events, I will take my two young sons as an example. Let's say my younger son hits my older son. Whether on purpose or by accident, it doesn't really matter. Feeling victimized, my older son's little brain will scream for "justice", and he will hit back. An eye for an eye, after all! But, because he is older and hopped up on emotion, his punch packs much more, well, punch than the original infraction, so now my younger son

feels hard done by. To make it “even” he really goes for it and now we have a full-fledged fight which continues to escalate. (Feel free to generalize this insignificant example to much larger issues and players like political parties, Congress, the Middle East, etc.)

Wouldn't it have been more effective if, after the initial infraction, my older son had shown mercy, and (if he were capable) thought to himself, “I just got punched and I'm mad about it. I could hit back, and much harder, which might feel good in the short term. But even though I'm angry I do still love my brother and don't want to hurt him. Plus, hitting back will lead to no good. So, I'm done playing with him for the day.” Now, without a word, he walks away and refuses to play for the rest of the day, and the younger boy is left thinking, “Oh, man! I shouldn't have hit him. Now I'm alone, bored, and I feel bad. My own stupid actions really made my life suck.” Now that's justice!

Now let's look at Psalm 103 again. “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger...He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.” Basically, the psalmist is saying that God doesn't give us what we think we deserve. He is just, yet merciful, in his dealings with us. Striking that balance is not always easy, but as Freemasons we have some tools that may aid us in doing so. Here is the previous diagram, but with a few additions:



As we all know, the Worshipful Master is represented by the pillar of Wisdom; the Senior Warden, by the pillar of Strength; and the Junior Warden, by the pillar of Beauty. Thinking back to the example of my sons, the older boy could have shown strength by hitting back, and it may have *felt* like justice. But would it have been wise? Probably not. Were he able to temper his

immediate need for justice/revenge and move a bit more toward the East, where Wisdom is seated, he could show mercy *and* handle the situation in a just way. The result, of course, is found mid-way between Geburah and Khesed and a bit to the South: Tifaret, or Harmony.

Each of the principal officers in the Lodge also has a Working Tool associated with his station, what are termed the Immovable Jewels. The Square is in the East; the Level in the West; and the Plumb in the South. As Masons, we are taught to make use of them for noble and glorious purposes. These purposes are given us in the Blue Lodge, but are elaborated upon by the Advocate at the end of the drama for the Twentieth Degree. Reflecting upon the Square and Level, he says, "Like a building well squared and leveled, you are to be firm and steadfast in your convictions of right and justice" (degree script, p. 28). You can see that "squared and leveled" correspond to "right and justice," respectively. That is, the Square will lead you to what is right (for all parties involved), tempering somewhat the Level's cry for justice. When something is level, and has achieved equilibrium, it resembles a balanced scale, a fitting symbol of Justice. "In the scales of justice you are to weigh the facts and the law alone, nor place in either scale personal friendship or personal dislike, neither fear nor favor," the Advocate says. How harmonious our Lodges, businesses, homes, towns, and nations would be if only such simple (but not easy) advice could be followed!

Only when we have found that middle way between Strength and Wisdom, can we manifest Beauty, represented by the Plumb. Again, the Advocate distills the idea to its essence: "Like a temple erected by the plumb, you are to lean neither to one side or the other." Remember, Brothers, *we are the temple we are working on!* The goal is to find that middle path so that our character is as beautiful and harmonious as a building that has been trued using the Working Tools of a Fellow Craft. "A Master of the Symbolic Lodge is a leader and a teacher; his life should exemplify the path of Masonic virtue" (*A Bridge to Light*, 161).

Although my diagram is not exact, I had hoped to make the lines radiating from the South toward the West and East a ninety degree angle, thus transforming the three sephirot from the Tree of Life into not only a representation of the Lodge, but of the Forty-seventh Problem of Euclid. According to the ritual of the Grand Lodge of Washington, "this discovery was accepted by our ancient brethren as a key to the nature of the Divine Being." As we saw at the beginning of this paper, in Psalm 103, the Divine Nature is to show mercy and compassion. The Lord deals justly with us, but does not always mete out what we deserve. When wronged, sometimes the stronger thing to do is to show forgiveness. Consequences are necessary, but angry revenge is not the same as justice. "He will not always accuse us, nor will he keep his anger for ever."

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