

A Bridge to Somewhere
Yom Kippur Morning 5779
September 19, 2018

Imagine a couple on a first date. Despite the now-obligatory pre-date Google research they both did they are, really, just getting acquainted. The man in this heterosexual pairing is, um, doing most of the sharing. Suddenly he realizes it. He stops, looks at his date earnestly and says: “Enough about me. What do you think about me?”

Looking at others. And looking at ourselves. A lesson, for this holiest of days. And a new way of approaching an ancient land, which calls to us from far away.

In the world of traditional Jewish learning, in the yeshiva and in several Chasidic schools, the formal study of the Talmud classically commences not at the beginning, but with Bava Metzia. Students first encounter either the second chapter, the section stating that “these are the lost objects one can keep, and these are the ones which you must declare,” which reminds me of going through customs. Or they begin with this:

שנים אוחזין בטלית זה אומר אני מצאתיה וזה אומר אני מצאתיה
זה אומר כולה שלי וזה אומר כולה שלי זה ישבע שאין לו בה פחות מחציה
וזה ישבע שאין לו בה פחות מחציה ויחלוקו

Two are holding on to a garment. One says: “I found it,” and the other says, “I found it.” One claims “it’s all mine,” and the other claims “it’s all mine.” One takes an oath declaring not less than half a stake in it, and the other takes an oath declaring not less than half a stake. So the court divides the garment (presumably – demands that it be sold and the proceeds split.)

What a place to begin! Not a reflection on God, an exploration of prayer, a mystical vision. But the down and dirty job of justice: competing claims, unproveable assertions, a leap of faith, and action which may well be unfair. And for the litigants? They both claim it all. And they still have to share.

Look closely and there is balance in the world. In and out, old and new, yours and mine, you and me.

One verse stands out, from the Torah portion the Reform movement has chosen to read, on the afternoon of Yom Kippur. Three simple words in Hebrew, which one later sage would identify as the greatest lesson in our entire tradition. "*Vei'ahvta l'reyecha kamocha*. You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Now this, this is a place I might expect to start! Powerful, loving, making connections, forging a bond between me and you! How can we go wrong, with such a line?

But religion, at its worst, can reflect the narrow and fearful impulses of the human spirit as well as the most noble. There are those in the Jewish world who hear in these words something very different than do I. *Vei'ahavta l'reyecha **kamocha?*** Love your neighbor *as yourself?* No, they say: read, rather: "love your neighbor, who is like you." That is, the sphere of care and concern and compassion extends... not to all human beings. But only to those who...walk the same path, live the same way, eat and dress and pray and say

the same things. Love the other observant Jews in your community! And who cares about... anyone else?

But I see something... very different... in this bridge between me and you. Yes, I think the verse wants us to love “the other,” the neighbor, the one who is near us, but not us. But the word “*kamocha*” is still a key. Even the last syllable, “*cha*, yourself.”

Where is the end, and where is the beginning? Because I am not sure you can love another, an *other... unless and until...* you love yourself.

On Erev Rosh HaShanah I mentioned the philosopher Martin Buber. Actually, it had been a while. When I was first ordained, serving as an Assistant Rabbi in Boca Raton – and yes, I have a lot of trouble, now, thinking of Florida as up north, and out west – it seems I mentioned him in every sermon I gave for the first month a half. Julie quietly took me aside and told me I had to talk about someone else, every once in a while!

So it’s been a while since I have focused on Buber. But his core idea – years ahead of its time – is a foundation, for me, for both individual spirituality, and, also, our communal, indeed, our national life as a people. As I had said last week, he places primary emphasis on meeting, on interactions, on relationships, deeply and truly coming to know both oneself and an “other,” what Robert Heinlein once called “grokking” each other. Buber called this the I-Thou encounter.

In his lifetime, though, he was not only a preacher of personal ethics, but an active Zionist, and an immigrant to Israel. And in his value system, he set a standard of sanctity and spirituality in relationships not just between individuals, but also between groups. He envisioned an Israel interacting with the world – and in particular with its Arab neighbors – as a potential... this is hard to even say now, but as a model for interactions between all groups, all over the world.

Well, it hasn't exactly worked out that way. And yet...

The whole issue of who are we, and who are they, and who is in, and who is out, and how does everyone get along, comes to a head more centrally, more obviously, and with more at stake in issues around Israel, than in any other area of Jewish life today.

And, more: I believe that the questions of what it means to be a Jew in the world today are intimately, inseparably yet often invisibly bound up with the fact of a free and independent Jewish state in the world once again. How will the values of Judaism dreamed up in exile, convictions about how to behave proposed while powerless, texts written out as a kind of theoretical exercise or fantasy, how will that play out, in the reality of a new Jewish public square, of Jews in power in our ancient homeland? And for us, for Jews who do not live in the Jewish homeland, what does it mean to be Jewish outside of Israel, when there is a Jewish state once again?

I believe with all my heart that a personal relationship with Israel is a fundamental part of Jewish life today. That is why one of the first things I began planning here, before everything was literally turned upside down, was a congregational family trip to Israel. That trip will, God willing, take place July 7-21, 2019. I invite all of you to try, I truly hope that many of you – *especially* those who have never been before – I look forward to being with many of you on that journey. There are two times coming up to learn more and have input about that trip. The first is next Sunday night, September 23rd, at 5 PM, just before Erev Sukkot services, and what should be a wonderful sushi and saki under the Sukkah. The second, on Thursday, November 1st, includes a personal meeting with the travel agent likely handling the trip.

That is why, as well, I was so eager to bring a taste of Israeli life here to the islands. The Israel Film Series, launched in July – albeit with one selection probably too grim and gritty to hold wide appeal, is meant to open a window... not only into a complicated Israeli reality, but also a vibrant culture of art and free expression. And to show, as I hope we have, that Israel is far more complex, and even more compelling, than the effective but superficial myths on which many of us were raised, of bold pioneers of unblemished character who probably don't even sweat, turning the dessert green. That film series will, soon, continue.

And then, here, now, one more step, I hope we can take together.

I want to introduce you to a friend of mine. Well, I consider him a friend, because I have learned so much from him, even though we are not hanging-out type close. But, as happens when someone you know speaks with depth and decency, when they lay bare who they are and invite you to share what matters the most to you, well, it creates a sense of being close.

Yossi Klein HaLevi is an American-born Israeli writer. And, as it happens, when I look at his life, and I see an arc in his books and his work, that same journey from “me,” to “you” to “we” that I have been trying to tease out and teach about this morning. He has, I think, gone from assertive, to attentive, to aspirational; from self, to other, to a balance of both.

Yossi’s life begins in a world of suspicion and aggression, thugs and tough guys. Son of a Holocaust survivor, reared in a rough neighborhood in New York, he was, once, a follower of Meir Kahane and active in the Jewish Defense League. *Memoir of a Jewish Extremist: The Story of a Transformation*, tells of his journey out of vigilante justice and radical politics, into... well... I would say the sensitivity he displays today. And it tells of his aliyah, his move to Israel as a young man.

This is a man who learned how to listen. Convinced that politicians and secular nationalists were missing something significant about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, something... well... spiritual... he spent time with religious communities and leaders of other faith traditions. *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden* explores peace as a spiritual value, in Muslim and Christian

communities in Israel. It was an awkward first date, Google research he did in advance did not fully prepare him for the encounter but at least... he let others do the talking! He grew as a Jew, and a human being, as a result.

And then something truly remarkable happened. Yossi met an American imam. A friendship was born which is changing the world, one relationship, one disciple, one new leader at a time.

In 2013, Yossi Klein HaLevi and Imam Abdullah Antepli, under the auspices of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, launched a crazy, unique amazing initiative. Modeled in some ways on the Rabbinic Leadership Initiative, which I have been part of, and the Christian Leadership Initiative, which I would strongly recommend to colleagues, including a certain tall reverend down the road about to make his first trip to Israel... what they launched was, predictably, called the Muslim Leadership Initiative. But MLI is quite a bit more challenging – and much, much more controversial – than the other two. MLI, three-year program for carefully chosen participants, brings emerging Muslim leaders from North America and around the world to Jerusalem, to share and learn and listen... and for Muslims to encounter, *from a Jewish perspective*, what Judaism, Jerusalem and Israel mean to us. It is education and exposure, rather than politics. Its only agenda, perhaps, is the profound belief that people getting to know and care about each other, while it may not and maybe should not change minds or solve problems, nevertheless

has the power... to open hearts, build bridges, and dream in ways which we could not dream before. This is who I am. What do you think about that?

Controversial? Very. Some participants received death threats. Others felt they had to remain anonymous. Some see it as a betrayal, a violation of the boycott, aid and comfort to the Zionist enemy. But the force of the reaction is a signal, a clue, that something important is happening. Through Antepi and HaLevi's vision – and their unlikely friendship – a new energy, a new spirit, a commitment to hear and to share the deepest parts of ourselves... can be found in many parts of the Muslim world...and the Jewish world as well.

That, I think, was HaLevi's most important legacy. Until now.

Related to MLI, emerging from it, and the other “half” of the listening he did in *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*, I think his most important book is the one which came out a few months ago. This is a book which, now, this morning, I am give to you as a gift, one copy for each family here today.

Letters to my Palestinian Neighbor is, I believe, the “cha” in *kamocha*. It is telling our tale, in a way which... well, I think we all need to hear. And know. And absorb. Whether we agree with his perspective or not, whether we would tell our story in the same way or not, this is one of those things I think we need to take in, in order to share who we are with others.

This book is short, clear, and accessible. It makes the case for Israel, its place in our past, our yearning and our need; its role in the present, its

complexity and significance, its centrality for our future. It does this in about the best way I have ever seen. And it does so, remarkably, while painfully, honestly, and openly recognizing the Palestinian narrative, with its power, its difference, even its also-right-ness. That balance, that sense of both-and over either-or, that is very, very rare.

So look, he's not giving up his claim to the garment. "HaKol Sheli! It's all mine," he says, or it should be. And, as the Mishna taught us, staking that claim, stating what is important to you, giving voice to your core belief, the court, the test of time, the world will weigh that in what happens, in the long run.

But Yossi knows, and acknowledges, that someone else is saying... the same thing. It's all mine, they say, just as do we. And in this book, he invites that, he welcomes it. And he...reluctantly, painfully, intensely and honestly... somehow he knows... what has to happen next.

A rare voice. And a needed one. Now, more than ever.

It is about us. And it is an invitation to them. It is I, and Thou. *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*. Take it, read it, share it.

I think of that first date, with which I opened this morning. How do we get to know each other? My friends, this Yom Kippur, let us commit ourselves

to dive more deeply, share more freely, and listen more carefully. May we be open, in honesty about ourselves – and to the passion and integrity of others.

You don't need to give up who you are, what you care about, or even talking about yourself. You just need balance: to be open, to listen, to hear, and to care.

And I invite you to join me, on a bridge to somewhere, a journey into the heart of Jewish destiny, an experience that can transform our lives.

This year in Charlotte Amalie. Next year in Jerusalem.

L'shanah Tovah.