

**I and Thou:  
For Ourselves and One Another  
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5771  
September 9, 2010**

*An awe-struck Chasid tells the following story about his wonder-working, community-conscious but somewhat stern master. Once, there was an important fund-drive, something the whole town needed, clearly a question of the common good. All the townsfolk contributed, even those who were known for being somewhat reluctant to part with their funds. All, that is, except for Meir. What to do? Meir was not contributing. He was the only holdout in town, the only one.*

*Thereupon rebbe and chasid pay a personal visit to the home of said Meir. The rebbe pleads on behalf of the project and yet – incredibly, impossibly – he is turned down! In frustration, in a moment of passion, the rebbe pronounced a curse upon the home, that it should shake and break and fall down! The chasid recounts that he spoke up to his master. “But Rebbe,” he said, “there are children in the home! Is Meir’s family to blame?” The rebbe thought about this for a moment, then quickly commanded that the house should not fall down. “And do you know what happened?” the chasid asked in wonder. “After the rebbe pronounced that the house should not fall down... it didn’t!”*

**My friends, I want to speak with you this morning about the delicate dance between giving and getting, about the role of individuals and the web of community. I want to focus on the balancing act between our inclination to see to our own satisfaction, and the obligation to look beyond ourselves.**

There are two anniversaries to mark this Rosh Hashanah, two centennial celebrations in Jewish history and life. Each of these events had a distinct impact on the shape and content of Jewish identity ever after.

The first occasion took place 200 years ago, in the short-lived French vassal-state known as the Kingdom of Westphalia, in territory before and after generally considered to be part of Germany. There, on July 17, 1810 in the town of Seesen, a businessman and communal leader named Israel Jacobson, acting largely on his own initiative, invited local dignitaries to the dedication of a Chapel in the well-respected Jewish school he ran. There, to astonishment and generally positive acclaim, the service that day featured order and decorum, readings recited in unison, a hidden choir singing part of the service in German, an organ, and a sermon delivered in the vernacular. To accommodate the sensibilities of modern families there might even have been mixed seating! The prayer experience was *geared towards the perceived preferences and spiritual fulfillment of those in attendance*, a uniquely self-conscious combination of Jewish content and contemporary context. Its innovation, in other words, was in service to the needs of the individual worshippers who were present, not alone about the heavy hand of the past. **On that day, 200 years ago, Reform Judaism was born.**

Years later, and a world away, other young Jews came together for a different purpose. Sweating in a swamp, swatting mosquitoes and fighting malaria, devoting their lives to an endeavor for which they had little formal

training, through some combination of necessity and ideology these visionaries launched one of the boldest social experiments in history. We read in their diaries and journals that “on the 25th of Tishrei, 5671 (October 28, 1910), we, ten men and two women comrades, came to Um Juni, and received the inventory from the ‘pioneering group’. We proceeded to establish an independent settlement of Hebrew workers on national land. A cooperative, community without exploiters or exploited - a commune.” **On that day, 100 years ago, a collective settlement and a communal movement were born. Deganya Aleph, the first Kibbutz, set to celebrate its own centennial... one month from now.**

Both Reform Judaism and the kibbutz movement have evolved over the years, of course, looking today quite different than they did. But *as an oversimplification* it is safe to say that those founding moments gave voice to ideals which affect us to this day. From 200 years ago in the halls of Europe and 100 years ago on the shores of the Galilee – the first the ideal of individuality, the fulfillment of the self; the second a vision of the common good, the collective, the people as a whole.

A lesson I first learned this past summer, a teaching of Micah Goodman, a professor of Jewish thought at the Hebrew University and a senior fellow at the Hartman Institute. The lesson comes from a close look at a strange story in the book of Samuel, and the carefully crafted recalibration of the same story several centuries later in the book of Chronicles.

On the surface, it is a tale about a census and a plague, punishment and reconciliation. In the initial version, as it appears in Samuel, King David orders a counting of the people. David's counselors and advisors raise objections, including the fact that such a counting served no obvious purpose other than the monarch's megalomaniacal need to know over whom he reigned – almost as if he was counting his toys. But David insisted, and the act is carried out.

But then, suddenly, “*vayakh lev David oto*; David's heart smote him.” He had a heart attack? A guilty conscience? He is, in any event, in pain. He regrets what he has done, acknowledges his sin, and comes before the prophet Gad, who gives David a choice of three punishments, one of which would strike the land, another of which would strike the people, and the final one would hit David and his family personally, forcing them to flee before their enemies.

David makes his fateful choice: let the plague afflict the people: “*Niplah-na b'yad Adonai...u'v'yad Adam lo 'epoleh*; let us now fall into the hand of the Eternal... let *me* not fall into the hand of man.” Fearing for himself, he opts for a collective punishment.

The plague comes, and 70,000 people die. (From a narrative point of view if you were not supposed to count the people in the first place, a plague is, of course, a brilliant response. It has the effect of making the whole effort pointless; the numbers you just so carefully compiled are rendered immediately obsolete.)

After disease and death work their way throughout the countryside, the plague seems about to reach Jerusalem when David finally speaks up, finds the avenging angel of the Eternal by the threshing floor of Arauna the Jebusite, and pleads for the people, instead of for himself: “I have sinned, but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray You, be against me and my father’s house.”

I confess that I was not that familiar with this story before studying it with Micah Goodman this summer. What I found the most interesting, the most instructive, was the subtly different way in which the story was retold, centuries later, by the writers of Chronicles. Here we see the genius of Jewish storytelling at work, the ability to re-interpret, re-invent, re-tell, re-form and re-construct the ancient tales to have them speak to a later audience.

The book of Samuel was much closer in time to days of David, and therefore to the events it purports to tell. By the time Chronicles was written these storied names were iconic figures of a heroic past, the lessons of whose lives – as the stories of George Washington in American folklore – were available for reshaping to suit the needs of a later time.

So what does Chronicles change? So little that it is easy to miss, but so much that the whole character of David is recast in more positive ways.

In Chronicles, first of all, it is the rarely-mentioned Satan who moves David to initiate the census, absolving the king of primary responsibility for an act of which God evidently disapproves.

Then, in Chronicles, we do not read “*Vayakh leiv David oto*, and David’s heart was struck,” but, rather, “*vayakh et Yisrael*; and God smote Israel.” Here, it is not David who are in pain, but the people.

Finally, Chronicles changes a single letter. We do not read, here, “*niphah-na b’yad Adonai*; let us fall into the hand of God,” but, instead, Chronicles has David say: “*ep’lah-na*; let me fall.”

The change is small but the impact profound. Who was the David of Samuel? A willful monarch, focused on his own needs, using the people for his own ends – then transferring punishment for his misdeed and the alleviation of his pain unto them. Only later, when he finally takes their suffering upon himself... only then does the plague break. David then purchases the site where God showed mercy, that threshing-floor where the plague broke. He bought the place and sanctified it, erecting there an altar to the Eternal. (Keep an eye on that altar. We are coming back to it in a moment.)

In the Chronicles revision, simply by adding a word, substituting another, and switching a single letter... a very different David emerges. Here, David is seduced into the census; he does not initiate it himself. Here, it is the people who are in pain, rather than him. And here, he offers at the outset to suffer *on behalf of the collective*.

God, however, as it turns out, and in Micah Goodman’s words from this summer, “God does *not need* David to die for the people. God needs David to *want to die* for the people.”

Both versions of the story agree on the ending however. They both end with the purchase of a farm, and the building of an altar. Obviously there is a power of place going on here.

But what was that place, where even in the first story David finally learned the lesson of self-sacrifice? In our tradition, that threshing-floor of Araunah is none other than... Mount Moriah. The place where Abraham is said to have offered up Isaac as a sacrifice, in the Torah portion we read this morning of Rosh Hashanah.

And if you think about it, the Akedah is the same story... and, as it turns out, it is the same story *at the same place*. It is, again, in Goodman's words, "the sacrifice that did not happen," the fact that Abraham was willing to offer his son, not that he did so.

That place where Abraham held his breath and put his dreams on the line, where David had to be willing to give it all up... that place is *also* the same place... the very spot... upon which David's son, a generation later... will bring the ark, and build the Temple. It is the site of the Second Temple as well, built by Ezra, expanded by Herod, where the remnant of the retaining structure now goes by the name of the "Kotel," the Western Wall. It is the single holiest site in Judaism.

**The Holy of Holies, built on such a foundation? What is the message here? What is the take-away?**

**It is this: that maybe religion, sanctity, holiness is not about – or not only about – expressing yourself. Maybe it is, in good part – and this is my final quote from Micah Goodman’s lesson – maybe it is about “getting *over* yourself.”**

The same story, at the same place: sanctity enters this world... in our willingness to sacrifice – not others for our needs, but ourselves, for theirs. Holiness flows from our willingness to give, to bear burdens, to be there for others.

What a great reminder! Especially for our lives as modern Americans, so caught up in self-expression and finding our inner voice and personal fulfillment. Religion, service, holiness... it’s not about assertion and accretion and satisfaction and feeling good! No, it’s about obligation and duty and sacrifice, the yielding of the will, the sense of something beyond, and above ourselves. “There is a God. You’re not it.”

But. But. What about you, and what about me? Why are we here? To gain, or to serve? Is it for ourselves, or for each other? And can it really be all one, without the other?

This is not an academic exercise. It has real world implications. We witness around us in this country right now an angry argument about attitudes towards government, a war of words that is nothing more, and nothing less, than a debate about perceptions of individual freedom in contrast to some sense of the collective and the communal. In May one Jewish social

justice advocate dared to use the phrase “the common good.” This is what a well-known right-wing commentator had to say in response:

This leads to death camps. A Jew, of all people, should know that. This is exactly the kind of talk that led to the death camps in Germany. Put humankind and the common good first. Once you get into the common good, it's over. And this is the perversion that every minister, pastor, priest, bishop -- every single person in America, every rabbi should be at the pulpit saying the same thing -- get away from anyone who talks about the common good. Because the common good -- if you put that first, and you reject individual -- you are headed for the death camps.

Offensive words, and extremist rhetoric. And what would these self-proclaimed defenders of freedom have us do, go all the way back to the other side? Should we say that everyone, aggressively pursuing their own self-interest with no external constraint or regulation, is the only appropriate model for society?

I do not believe that the communal and the individual are automatically in opposition to one another, nor do I believe that when this tension exists, it is automatically a bad thing. I have cited, on previous occasions, the Jewish wisdom embedded in... um... Star Trek. Here I refer to the movie in which Spock was saved, but the main characters agonize aloud about how to balance “the good of the one against the good of the many.” Can we not find a place where the two meet, overlap, support one another?

I believe in the “me” and the “we,” the David of Samuel *and* the David of Chronicles, the vision of Westphalia and the values of Deganya. This is not a zero sum game. It is not a question of the individual versus the community, but, with Buber, of I *and* Thou.

A generation ago a young and first-ever Catholic American president uttered the words: “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

What a powerful call to service and sacrifice. But I wonder how these words would be received if they were said today. Why shouldn't I ask what my country can do for me?

Let's admit it. We examine, all the time, what we are getting out of an experience. What's in it for us? And maybe it's even partly true... that for too many centuries sacrifice for some greater good was, indeed, a palliative excuse offered up to postpone individual satisfaction. There has to be some sense of the self as well. Not all one, and not all the other. Healthy holiness is found in the balance.

My friends, I hope you “get something” out of being here, and being part of this community. This is a theme to which I expect to return on the morning of Yom Kippur. But let us not forget that helping others get something out of being here... is also important. I hope that “we” are there for you. But we are at our best when we remember that the people around us need our love, and support, and involvement, and energy... just as much as we want theirs. There is a sign hanging in the home of friends of ours which reads: “We may not have it all together, but together we have it all.”

And you know... you know in your own lives, I am sure, we know in our experience... when it all comes together. Maybe it is a moment caring for a

friend, bringing a meal, visiting a hospital. You know that moment when you do something to help... and you realize... that you got out of the encounter... at least as much as you gave. And maybe even more.

A man I once knew was fond of talking about a Chinese meal that changed his life. At the end of the meal, he cracked open the cookie, read the words, and then kept the paper with him in his wallet, as his own personal philosophy... for the rest of his life. The words read: "If you continually give, you will continually receive."

Two anniversaries come together this Rosh Hashanah. One is about "me" and the other about "we." One is about fulfillment, and the other about service. They are the two foundations of the Temple we build, and they have to function together because we know -- although the quote comes from a different context -- that "a house divided against itself cannot stand."

Samuel and Chronicles. Westphalia and Deganya. Me, and we. Let us celebrate them both.

L'shanah Tovah.