

“Giving and Taking”

D’var Torah for Shabbat T’rumah/Zakhor February 19, 2021

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You are no doubt familiar with Hillel’s beloved dictum, *im eyn ani li mi li -If I am not for myself, who will be? Uch’she’ani l’atzmi mah ani – and if I am only for myself, what am I? v’im lo achshav eymatai – and if not now, when?*

The tension in that statement is remarkable. It appeals to our better nature *and our worst nature*. It warns us to be defensive; and it adjures us to be generous.

The confluence of Torah readings for this Shabbat does the same. On the one hand we have the special portion *zakhor/remember*, quoted from Deuteronomy on the Shabbat immediately preceding Purim.

The Purim story is a classic example of *im eyn ani li mi li – If I am not for myself, who will be?* – in which the Jewish protagonists do not even wait around for God to intervene to save them from the tyrannical descendant of the Amalekites, Haman. Our special reading warns us to “remember Amalek,” and contradictorily, to “blot out his memory.” Either way, it tells us that we need to look over our shoulder. We need to be careful. We need to trust-but-verify, and maybe not even to trust all that much.

Paired with this reading is the marvelous section from the Book of Exodus known as *T’rumah*. T’rumah corresponds to Hillel’s second clause: *Uch’she’ani l’atzmi mah ani – and if I am only for myself, what am I?* Here the Torah calls us to plumb the depths of our hearts for generosity. God asks for voluntary donations –

t'rumah – ostensibly for the sanctuary or tabernacle, but really to teach the Israelites how to give of themselves and their possessions toward the building of a sacred community.

V'yik'khu li t'rumah me-eit kol ish hasher yidvenu libo

“Let them take gifts for me, from every person whose heart is so moved.”

This is hardly the Torah of watching out, of looking over one's shoulder, of rooting out one's enemies and blotting out their names. This is not “if I'm not for myself, who the heck will be!” This is another voice entirely. Here the voice calls us to look within, to locate our better nature, and to bring that goodness forth into the public domain. Indeed it calls us to fashion a new public domain based on trust and good will. Verify? Fine. But first and foremost, trust.

Note, however, that the Torah realizes full well that before we can give, we need to be in touch with our baser human instinct to “take.” The text somehow knows that our willingness to give requires us not to overcome our greed, but to incorporate it into our consciousness.

This may be why the text has God saying not “*v'yitnu li - give me t'rumah,*” but rather “*v'yik'khu li - take for me t'rumah.* We know we want to take. We must learn, however, to take as a nuanced form of giving.

This beautiful teaching from the Musar tradition gets to the heart of the matter. I quote: “The Torah uses the language of taking in order to hint to us that the giver, at the moment he or she is giving, must sense him- or herself to be like the one who is receiving, i.e., taking.” In other words, only total empathy with the

one in need – the “taker” - can allow us to fully experience what it means to be the giver. And thus to totally transform the meaning of “taking.”

What are we left with? “If not now, when.” We are left balancing two opposite and necessary emotions. We know that we are, at our core, takers. We are naturally defensive. We know this about ourselves. Yet we know that we could learn to be empathizers with those who need to take from our giving. We know we need to balance our taking-for-ourselves with giving-for-others. We know that we need to reconcile these two sides of ourselves *achshav*, as Hillel would say – “now” – while we still can.

What will we end up with? If we are fortunate, and blessed, and persistent, and patient, we will end up with a sacred community, a new form of public domain, a *mishkan*, in which the Holy One who teaches us both caution and generosity can dwell among us.

V'shachanti b'tocham. And I will dwell in their midst. Not in their material sanctuary. Rather, in their very selves. But only, of course, if their taking is exceeded by their giving.