

“*Chavruta*” - “Real Meeting”

Yom Kippur 5784-2023

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

I.

Tomorrow on the Jewish calendar is the fiftieth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, the 10th of Tishrey, 5734, October 6, 1973. Many of us remember it with horror and eventual relief, and also as a comeuppance from which our people could never completely recover.

I was a junior in college back then. I had just spent the entire summer in Israel. Now back at school, I went from dorm room to dorm room in the first days of the war, knocking on students' doors and asking for contributions to the Israel Emergency Fund, but also inviting dialogue about Israel and anything else my classmates wanted to talk about. Could a college student do that in America today?

Thirty years ago last week, September 13, 1993, the Oslo Accords were signed on the White House lawn. It was a momentary highwater mark of hope-between-peoples in an era that has seen hope for peace between peoples all but vanish.

Every rabbi in America (myself included) threw out their Rosh Hashanah sermon that week and re-wrote their remarks to address that historic moment. I remember the energy and enthusiasm filling this tent as though it were only a year or two ago. Or, as though it were an eternity ago.

Twenty years ago this month, on September 9, 2003, Palestinian terrorists suicide-bombed the Cafe Hillel in Jerusalem, killing a bride and her father on the eve of her wedding, and steeling Jews around the world for a future of guardedness. It was an iconic event in the Second Intifada, which may have rendered popular support for an eventual two states in the Land of Israel all but impossible to achieve. Though many of us diehards keep trying.

On that same day, September 9, 2003, this congregation held one another close as we stood out front and watched our beloved synagogue building go up in flames. No one was hurt. The congregation persisted and thrived. The community in our midst surrounded us with all sorts of aid, but more important, with supportive love. With *relational, non-transactional* love.

I can still see - still *feel* - all of those rabbis and ministers holding us in their outstretched arms and cheering us on.

I mention these anniversaries not to dwell on them, but to point out the obvious: Big events “out there” create a backdrop, a context, a “ground,” (as in “figure and ground”) for the very local life we lead together right here. Those events stay with us, even as we go on right here, in this local place and time. They are like the mysterious microwave background “noise” left over from the Big Bang. Always there. Always here.

But there are two anniversaries I do want to discuss. One in particular.

One hundred years ago, in 1923, two books of note appeared. One was Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* (with some of the weirdest illustrations ever to appear in a book!). The other was Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* (thankfully with no illustrations). To this day, both of these books are pathbreaking achievements of insight and wisdom. Both use language in what was then a new, disarmingly direct way. Both not only provide context and background for the civilization they spoke to, but are in fact *about* context and background. Both call on us humans to reset the way we think about the very fabric of our lives; the way we think about what real living means.

And both came hard on the heels of a world war more horrific, more dehumanizing, than anything humankind had ever brought upon itself. Both authors strove to lead human beings back from the brink, toward a shared language of human decency and respect. Which is why they are presciently relevant a century later.

It is especially Buber’s book that I want us to consider on this Yom Kippur night, though I’ll briefly come back to *The Prophet*.

Buber’s *I and Thou* is not a Jewish book, per se. Buber himself was hardly an observant Jew. His central thesis, however, sits at the core of the Torah’s worldview: *panim el panim*, “face to face,” the idea that (as Buber himself says it) **“all real living is meeting.”**

Not “experiencing.” Meeting. In fact, he claims, “experience” *reduces* the other whom we encounter to “components” of the other, and thus to an “it” and not a full “thou.” I love your hair. I love your wit. I love your generosity. I love your sense of humor. All components of “it.”

This sounds counterintuitive, so let me clarify. Buber tells us that there are two distinct ways we relate to others. One is transactional (“I-It”). The other is totally non-transactional (“I-Thou”). In those rare moments - *extremely* rare moments - when we can get to a nanosecond of fully relating to another person as “thou” without making any *use* of that person whatsoever, at that moment we can also sense the presence of a third party, which is as close as we ever get to God’s self, God’s “thou.” God, that is, not as an “it” over there, but as the background, the context, in Hebrew the *reka*, of that full, unmediated meeting with another.

Buber nearly drives us crazy as we try to wrap our heads around his impossibly idealistic challenge. Bypass “I-It?” Strive toward the unreachable asymptote of “I-Thou?” It’s like trying to see both images at once in the optical illusion of the chalice and the two faces. One can almost do it, but then not. We inevitably fall back to I-It. We compartmentalize the other person. We “make use of” the other. Nicely, politely, respectfully, perhaps. But I-It nonetheless.

Now, however, comes Buber’s breakthrough teaching. Yes, he says, we invariably relate to the other as “it.” We need others to work for us, or to pay us to work for them. We need to serve and service one another in a zillion ways, and this includes people we love. Without I-It, all functionality ceases. Life stops in its tracks.

But if we can learn to let our knowledge of “I-Thou” set the standard - the grounding - for our myriad necessary I-It relationships, then we will have transformed human civilization. We will have learned to see the sacredness at the core of all persons, all relationships, all families, all communities. Everyone and everything.

We will know what Moses knows when he does not “see” God ( כי לא יראני (האדם וחי אשר ידעו פנים (אל פנים). And when Moses can then translate that “knowing” into knowing the faces of those at the base of the mountain whom he must teach and lead.

I am telling you this - *teaching* you this, if I may be so bold in my valedictory Yom Kippur moment - because I believe with all my heart that this idea of non-transactional “meeting” defines this congregation we have been

building together, meeting after meeting, for lo, these many decades. *At least some of the time.*

**At our best, we have been useful to one another, but we have tried not to use one another. And certainly not to misuse or abuse one another.**

II.

In point of fact, this congregation has been an ongoing experiment, in addition to being a necessarily pedestrian organization through which self-selecting Jews obtain items and services they need in order to function as Jews: life-cycle support; High Holy Day seats; pastoral counseling; education for their children.

The question, though, was always this: Could a mainstream Jewish congregation in an unexceptional setting in the middle of a typical cluster of American suburbs provide what people need it to provide, but also - and primarily - be a place grounded in I-Thou? Grounded in present-ness? Not just acceptance and inclusion, though of course that. But something deeper and more basic: נוכחות, **present-ness!**

I'd like to think that when visitors tell us they felt "welcomed" here from the get-go, their feelings were not the result of our hospitality. I want to believe that these were responses to our present-ness, both in the way we speak with one another, and in the dynamic of our services, classes, lectures, exhibits, even the architecture of our prayer spaces. And especially *this* prayer space, for everything it literally and symbolically means.

That's a nice legacy for Bet Am Shalomers to pass forward. And speaking of which, people are asking me these days: "What do you hope your legacy will be, Rabbi B and Cantor Benjie?" Well, we had hoped to create, in partnership with you, a congregation of folks with an exceptionally voracious appetite for song, prayer, study, *middot* and *mitzvot*. A congregation of Sabbath observers, who fill our prayer hall every week with themselves *and their children*. A congregation overwhelmingly attuned to the rhythms of the Jewish week and Jewish year.

A congregation fluent in the language of *tefillah* and *talmud torah*, i.e., traditional davening, unabashed personal prayer, spiritual self-improvement and the study of sacred texts. A congregation with one-

hundred per cent participation in the work of *tikkun olam*, the healing of society's ills, and of commitment to Israel and the world Jewish community, *k'lal yisrael*, and to helping Israel and world Jewry be ever more just and righteous. A congregation that for all of its universality and secularness, nonetheless sees itself as a modern manifestation of a particularist *religious* community.

**In short, a non-Orthodox congregation of Jews who take on the mitzvot of Judaism voluntarily, to no less an extent than they would do so if they felt they had no choice; if they felt, as the midrash would have it, as if Mount Sinai were being suspended over their heads.**

Needless to say, we've achieved some of those things to some extent for some of the people who call us home. Not nearly as much as we had hoped - so far. And sometimes the grass looks a tad greener up the street.

True, לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, it's not fair for us to expect ourselves to complete the task, but ולא אתה בן חורין להבטל ממנה, we can't pat ourselves on the back if we have underachieved in some respect. There's more to do, and I pray you will all keep doing it in the years to come.

But all of those things merely constitute the *foreground*. They are the "things" you can observe and quantify. They are great stuff, but in the spirit of I-Thou, they are just high-class "components." They are "what" Benjie and I want us to be. They are generators of *nachas*, of personal pride (and maybe a bit of pridefulness, too) - for the two of *us*, and maybe for you, too.

But as for "legacy," I speak for both of us when I say we'll be thrilled with something else entirely. That "else" is a sense that the neighborhood looks to our shul to set the tone - the *reka*, the background - for the way we all need to "be" toward one another. It seems to me that this is essentially true about us. And if only our newest (and especially our youngest) members can pick up on that "M.O.," then the legacy, so to speak, will be sealed. If only they can come here looking for "meeting" as well as "stuff," then we will be more than okay. We will come close to being *shalem*, as "whole" as one can be in this imperfect version of the world.

(I used to get uncomfortable laughs from veteran congregants at new members' events when I would tell the new members that when they plunked down their money and joined Bet Am Shalom, they got *nothing*.)

### III.

At Shabbat Shuvah yesterday, we recited the prophet Hosea's famous dictum, קחו עמכם דברים, "take with you words." In that spirit, let me give you several Jewish phrases that all of us can turn to in our ongoing effort to enable 'I-Thou' to set the tone for our holy transactional Jewish work.

The first is כף זכות, "benefit of the doubt." Give the other the benefit of the doubt, even and especially when it seems counterintuitive, even undeserving.

The second is אלו ואלו, "both these and these." This is the famous dictum of Hillel when solving a dispute: "Both these and these are the words of the living God." Even when I am certain that my opinion is correct, nonetheless be convinced that the other's opinion is also correct in every respect, in ways I don't yet understand. Live with that paradox. See beyond the other person's opinion, politics, and point of view. Try to see all the way to that person's essential "useless" self.

The third is סבר פנים יפות, "a cheerful (lit., "beautiful") countenance." This is the dictum of Shammai: Greet all persons with a beautiful countenance, a סבר פנים יפות. Which leads directly to the meeting point between the human Moses and the Divine Holy One of Being, namely פנים אל פנים, "face to face." Let your face meet the other face without hesitation, mitigation, limitation, or expectation. Be truly present for the other. And only in the moment after the encounter, notice upon reflection that the two of you were indeed not alone in that moment.

And then allow that "noticing" to set the tone for all the productive transactions that must necessarily follow if we are to do more than sit here and look at each other until we keel over from boredom.

### IV.

As promised, here is a *pasuk* from Kahlil Gibran, in his chapter appropriately called "On Religion:"

“Is not religion all deeds and all reflection, and that which is neither deed nor reflection but a wonder and a surprise ever springing in the soul, even while the hands hew the stone or tend the loom?...

“...Your daily life is your temple and your religion. Whenever you enter into it take with you your all...

“...And take with you all people: For in adoration you cannot fly higher than their hopes nor humble yourself lower than their despair...

“...And if you would know God, be not therefore a solver of riddles. Rather, look about you and you shall see God playing with your children. And look into space; you shall see God walking in the cloud, arms outstretched in the lightning and descending in rain. You shall see God smiling in flowers, then rising, hands waving in trees.”

In other words, and here again I quote the Rabbis, או חברותא או מתותא, “Either true meeting, true companionship, or death.” Implying that true meeting, true companionship, true חברותא, is the only state of being that can truly be called “living.”

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יחידו של עולם, Only One of Being, may this wonderful congregation, this bold “experiment,” live and thrive, always doing much good “stuff,” always transacting in productive, profound and prolific ways, but always grounded in חברותא, in present-ness, in the “useless” meeting of face to face, and, ultimately, always seeking Your face.

As the psalm adjures us: בקשו פניו תמיד - “Always seek My face.”