

Is not all about you!

Yom Kippur Morning 5784 - Temple Kol Ami Emanu-El

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2,500 years ago, in an Athenian agora, the Greek philosopher and sophist Protagoras said, "Man is the measure of all things." Following the biblical prose, we could say, "And thus the world was ruined." Perhaps I am exaggerating, but not by much. There are various interpretations of this expression; some refer to the individual man (leading to cultural relativism and extreme individualism), while others refer to mankind as a whole (humanity), leading to a more monolithic worldview (a form of totalitarianism). However, what all variants of this expression share is the idea that it is humans who are at the center - we are the yardstick by which we view, analyze, and judge the world.

On this sacred morning of Yom Kippur, I would like to argue that few notions are more contrary to the Jewish spirit, the spirit of the Torah, the prophets of Israel, and our Talmudic texts than placing humans at the center of the world. Ultimately, this notion has led, over thousands of years, to the situation our world faces today - the decline of our societies into individualism.

If man is the measure of all things, then our human needs take precedence over the ecosystem that surrounds us. If man is the measure of all things, then my desires take precedence over the desires or needs of others. If man is the measure of all things, then my worldview becomes anthropocentric, where humans are the center of creation! "Chalilah," my grandfather would say. Judaism is a theocentric tradition where God is at the center, and ultimately, as I would like to suggest, the center is here on Earth in the human community, not in individual persons.

Not only do we harm our ecosystem and society in general when we put each of ourselves, our needs, and our desires at the center of all things, but we also harm ourselves by often believing that we are the center of the universe. How many times have you heard or said, "Why is this happening to me?" What if certain things simply happen, affecting both the good and the bad,

the just and the wicked alike? What if there isn't necessarily a malevolent plan by the world or by God to harm you? What if we move away from the center?

With your permission, I would like to suggest that from a Jewish perspective, it's not all about you! Instead, it's about recentering the community, the kehila, from God's perspective.

Individualism

Let's start with some facts. We live in an individualistic society. "Me" comes before "we." We live in a world where everyone thinks their needs are more important than the needs of others. We live in a world where many times we feel (though we often don't dare to say it) that others, that "the world," owe us something. We live in a society where claims for rights take precedence, but declarations of our obligations are seldom heard. We live in a society where liberalism has turned into libertarianism.

We know our history. We know the origins of the Industrial Revolution, the rise of modern democracy. We know that the quest for individualism (first politically and then psychologically) was a valid demand in the face of medieval absolutism, where the individual barely existed and freedom of choice was nearly nonexistent. I do not deny the merits and improvements that this "individualistic" thinking has brought to our world. Faced with medieval dogma, liberalism gave us freedom, a "freedom from constraints," to use Rousseau's metaphor. However, hasn't the pendulum swung too far? Haven't we become so free that we've become selfish? Do we have so many possibilities that we no longer know what we truly want? Have we become so individualistic and secure in our own "perspectives" that we've lost our way in the face of an "objective truth"?

Yom Kippur and Individualism

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the creation of the first human being. Today, on Yom Kippur, each of us individually stands before God to ask for forgiveness for our (our!) mistakes. It appears to be a day where individualism also prevails! However, all the liturgy today is in plural. We do not say, "I have sinned," but rather, "we have sinned." Al Chet Shechatanu lefanecha, for the sin we have committed before You! In plural, not singular! Ashamnu, Bagadnu... we have been unjust, we have deceived (in plural!) Why, on the holiest day of the year, do we stand before God, contrite and repentant for our errors, and not speak in the first person singular but in the first person plural? Perhaps it is to try to break away from the prevailing individualism in our hearts and societies this year... perhaps to emphasize what

Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel once said, *"In a democratic society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."* Maybe because as babies one of our first words is "me me me", but a sign of growing up, of assuming the responsibility, of doing a collective Teshuvah is to start thinking more in the "we we we".

Allow me on this sacred Yom Kippur morning to share some Jewish perspectives on the excessive emphasis on the "self."

1. Mind your own business; it's not a Jewish belief: In the West, especially perhaps in the United States, we have grown up with the notion that each of us should focus on our own actions and not concern ourselves with what others are doing. We should try to be good people and not meddle in others' affairs. Each person with their own problems, each person with their own decisions... this notion, I cannot deny, has a very attractive and even positive idea, and yet, taken to its extreme (as I believe is happening in our time), it is very harmful. "Mind your own business" is not a Jewish response. "I'll do what I want, you do what you want" is not a Jewish response. The Midrash tells us of a group of sailors sailing in a small boat, and one bored sailor, tired of the long journey, began to drill a hole under his seat. His companions reprimanded him, saying that the ship was sinking, and he replied, "Mind your own seats; I'll do what I want with mine!" The message is obvious, a truism. In Jewish tradition, we have a mitzvah that tells us "Hocheach Tochiach et Amitecha," you shall surely rebuke your neighbor. When we see someone going astray, causing harm to themselves or their surroundings, we have a religious obligation to warn them of their error. We cannot say, "It's their life, and they can do what they want." This cultural relativism is an excuse for internal selfishness and a reluctance to make an effort to help others. With affection, love, respect, and humility, we are called to try to correct the mistakes of others. Not everything can be the same to us! "Mind your own business" is not a Jewish belief!
2. The Value of Kehila-Community: The extreme value of individualism has also affected us as a Jewish community. The consumer society, where everything is for sale, where everything can be customized to the needs and whims of the customer, has also led us to believe that we can do the same with our religion and culture. We return to the times of the Shoftim, judges, where the Bible says that everyone did "the right thing

according to their own eyes". We lost the value of consensus, we lost the value of transcending our selfish needs for the needs of the community. There is value, I believe, in effort. There is value, I believe, in setting aside our own particular needs and trying to fit into an idea and a program that transcends us. Judaism has always placed emphasis not on the individual "believer" but on the community as a common-unity, as a meeting place. It is more convenient for me if Shabbat falls on Sundays. It suits me better to celebrate Hanukkah a few days later so that it doesn't coincide with winter break. It's more convenient for me to study in English rather than learning Hebrew... we must recenter the community before the self, the needs of the majority over our own. It's not the complete suppression of our own desires or needs; of course, every Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony should be unique, every wedding should be different from the last. Surely, we need to be flexible as a community to reach every Jew wherever they are. But we must also move away from the center and make the effort (yes, it is an effort, but if Judaism is about anything, it's about making an effort) to achieve a common unity in the community. There is value in commitment, there is inherent value in sacrificing for the common good. If every Jew had their customized Judaism, each one would be their own community. If we are part of a community, we often need to step away from the center and think of others before ourselves. *Al Tifrosh Min HaTzibur*, do not separate from the community, Hillel taught us. We must think of our Judaism in concentric circles... each time we move into a larger circle, we must yield or find common ground and strive to maintain harmony. In my room, I can make Judaism what I want; we live in a free society! When I leave my room with my family, I must find common schedules and traditions to enjoy and live a shared Judaism. When I leave with my family and approach a larger community, we must be more flexible in terms of customs and traditions. And when we unite among communities, we must make even more effort to be flexible and find points of unity among all forms of Jewishness. The self is too small; the world is too big. It is the family-community that is the midpoint for living and expressing our identity.

3. The Sense of Transcendence, Nothing Begins with Us, Nothing Should End with Us: We are part of a millennia-old chain. A Jew can never see themselves as the beginning or the end; we are part of something that transcends time and space. In many religions or cultures, one can be the best of all in solitude, but not in Judaism. As the old saying goes, "Nine rabbis do not make a Minyan, but ten cobblers do." From the very

conception of Judaism, transcendence through the generations has been central. Even Moses, before his death, tells the people of Israel that God does not make the covenant only with those who were standing there on the mountain that day (Deut 29:9), but that covenant is also with the generations that came before, with the patriarchs and matriarchs (Ibid, 12), and also with those who are not yet present (Ibid, 13-14). As the Tosefta (Sotá 7:3-4) explains, that covenant is also with those who will come, with the descendants of those who made that covenant on the plains of Moab. Before coming into this world, we were already part of this people. Most of us here did not choose to be Jewish; Judaism chose us. We are also joined by those who are Jews by choice, who out of love chose the faith of our parents and grandparents. Most of us are Jewish because our parents and grandparents were. That is also my case, and I would choose it every day of my life. But most importantly, as Shimon Peres was once asked, to define ourselves as Jews, the answer should not be that one of our grandparents is Jewish but rather that we are Jewish if our grandchildren are Jewish. Judaism did not start with us, and it should not end with us. We are continuers of a legacy, something much larger than our fleeting passage through this world. We must make it our own and pass it on to the next generation.

4. Some things just happen; they don't happen to you: Moving away from the center is not only about yielding for the common good, abandoning our selfishness, or feeling part of something greater than ourselves; it is also about alleviating an almost existential anguish that many suffer from. "Why is this happening to me?" How many times have we heard this question or something similar when someone experiences a tragedy, an illness, or something similar? What if we are not at the center? What if things just happen? I would like to invite you this Yom Kippur morning to embrace another Jewish worldview, one that takes the burden off individuals and emphasizes the commonalities. In an ideal world, the Talmud tells us (b. Avodah Zarah 54b), if a thief steals seeds and then plants them, they should not sprout. However, if they are watered, exposed to the sun, they will sprout just like those of their neighbor, the righteous and pious one who, with sweat and tears, obtained the seeds to support his family. We do not live in an ideal world; that will come in messianic times. The sages of the Talmud tell us, "The world pursues its natural course, and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account - HaOlam Keminago Noeg." The same goes for people who do good. In times of pandemic, not only the impious and wicked

die alone, but the just and pious also perish. When there are diseases in the world, they are suffered by good and bad people alike. In a war, both the good and the bad die. A tsunami does not distinguish between the ethical qualities of citizens. This is explained by Rabbi Nissim Ben Ruven in the 14th century: *"In the same way, when a certain malignant influence is released upon a place or clime, it will not manifest itself as the Blessed One's striking with rod or thong only specific individuals but as a generic maleficent force, which will cause injury even to him who does not deserve to be punished by it..."* (Derashot HaRan 8:38).

Conclusion

It's not all about you! You are important; never forget that. But you are not so important. None of us is indispensable, but the world would be very different without each of us. In the Jewish tradition, unlike some Eastern cultures, we should not eliminate the self; we should not seek to eliminate our ego or our own desires. We must put them into perspective, negotiate with ourselves and with that which transcends us. God created each human being unique, with their own voice, their own conscience, their own ideas, the Talmud teaches us. However, as human beings, we have come to understand that the only way to transcend in time and space is to relinquish that absolute self a little and complement it with a collective "we." Between selfish individualism on one extreme and totalitarian collectivism on the other, we must find that famous middle ground, Derech HaMelech, Shvil Hazaav, and that is the community.

This Yom Kippur morning is perhaps one of those great examples. Each one enters here as an individual, with their own fears, their own mistakes, their own anxieties, their own requests for forgiveness, and yet it is the shared liturgy, the liturgy inherited from our ancestors and shared in all Jewish communities around the world, that unites us. It is that plural liturgy that allows us to feel part of something greater than ourselves, something that transcends us.

Individualism also often leads to depression and anxiety, to feeling alone in this world, misunderstood, different... sometimes we want to be so unique and different that we cannot find another with whom to share those differences. Lo Tov Eiot Adam Levado, it is not good for humans to be alone, God tells us in Genesis. The gaze of others, the opinions of others shape us. We need another to transcend; no one can transcend in solitude. That is why we are a community.

In conclusion,

- Mind your own business, not a Jewish idea. We are here for each other; we have a responsibility to our fellow human beings.
- The world does not revolve around our navel. We are just a link in a millennia-old chain. Judaism did not start with us, and we have a responsibility to ensure it does not end with us.
- We must advocate for a Judaism (and a society) where we not only declare our individual rights but also advocate for our collective responsibilities.
- We must live a Judaism of concentric circles, from ourselves to Klal Israel, through our families and communities... Every time we expand the circle, we must be more flexible and yield more to find common unity.
- It's not about you; some things do not happen to us; they simply happen.

Chatimah Tovah,

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