

In the course of de-cluttering my home office, I came across a desk calendar, at least five years old, each page of which featured a pearl of Yiddish wisdom. I must have stopped using it about two thirds of the way through the year, because many pages were still attached to the pad. Before throwing the calendar away, I skimmed quickly over the sayings and quotations and kept the following poem to tape up on the door of my study at the synagogue. Ver iz a nar? Yener. Ver zet oys alt? Yener. Ver shtarbt? Yener. Yeder ich iz bay zich klug. Yeder ich iz bay zich yung. Yeder ich bay zich lebt eybig. Who is a fool? The other guy. Who looks old? The other guy. Who is going to die? The other guy. Every “I” to himself is clever. Every “I” to himself appears young. Every “I” in his own mind will live forever.

My reflections during the Rosh Hashanah holiday were devoted to the public agenda of the Jewish community and of America – the struggle for the soul of religion against forces of intolerance and obscurantism, the financial crisis now confronting us in America, and the challenges facing Israel in its 60th anniversary year. On Yom Kippur we turn inward to focus on the personal. Each “I” in the congregation this evening must look at himself or herself as he or she really is, not at the burnished and idealized image of ourselves that we cling to. Let us leave aside the poem’s reference to our denial of the realities of aging and mortality. That’s a whole other sermon. But let us recognize the poem’s central idea – our tendency to project our faults, our shortcomings, and our vulnerabilities onto others, the more effectively to deny their existence within ourselves. We have a lot invested emotionally in our idealized picture of the “ich”, the “I”, but no real growth or change is possible until we discard that image and replace it with a more honest and accurate one. Then alone can we embark on the changes that we need to make.

One of the most disturbing passages in the Torah for me has always been the story of Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron, who checked the course of a deadly plague God had visited upon the people of Israel in the wilderness as punishment for their licentious behavior with the women of Midian and for their idolatrous worship of the Midianite god by stabbing to death in a fit of zealous rage an Israelite prince and the Midianite woman whom he had brought into his tent. Pinchas was rewarded for his zeal by being granted a covenant of peace with God and the promise of an eternal priesthood for his descendants.

Needless to say, there are many midrashim on this passage, both ancient and modern. The most daring is the interpretation of a 19th century Chasidic rebbe, who wrote that the Israelite and his Midianite paramour were (despite appearances) not engaged in an ordinary act of sexual immorality but were in reality star-crossed lovers who had reached the highest level of spiritual and emotional attachment to each other and that Pinchas in his zealotry and immaturity had failed to recognize this. The main thrust of the midrashim, however, is neither to exonerate the lovers nor to blame Pinchas but rather to isolate the incident as a one-time action undertaken in time of emergency, a highly irregular short-circuiting of the niceties of judicial procedure. One should not presume to act at one and the same time as prosecutor, judge, and executioner. Were it not that his motivation had been pure, Pinchas, the Rabbis say, would have been deserving of the punishment of excommunication. And that is precisely the point – a warning against emulating the zealotry and vigilantism of Pinchas, because who among us can be certain of the purity of his motivation?

We think of ourselves as clever, altruistic, kind, generous, honest, and noble and the other fellow as foolish, self-centered, stingy, deceptive, and corrupt. But as we noted, our perceptions may have less to do with reality and more to do with a refusal to acknowledge our own personal faults. Similarly, when it comes to motivation, we see ourselves impelled by a desire to serve some transcendent purpose, some greater good, while the other guy always has an ulterior motive. We ourselves may not even be aware of our true motivations; psychology teaches us about the role of the unconscious in human behavior. That segment of our mental processes which we label “conscious” has been compared to the tip of an iceberg jutting above the surface of an ocean. Who knows what lurks beneath the surface, especially when we are seized by righteous anger? Psychologists tell us, and the whole history of humankind in the modern age confirms that some of the worst acts of violence and brutality have been perpetrated by those who believed themselves motivated by a desire to bring about their personal vision of the “good.” The Rabbis never to my knowledge spoke of the unconscious, but they did recognize that the same act could stem from varying motivations. One could be acting *l’shem shamayim* – for the sake of heaven or *she-lo l’shem shamayim*, not for heaven’s sake but for some self-serving end. Along with trading our idealized self-image for one

more closely aligned with reality, the tasks of this High Holiday season call for us to endeavor to bring our unconscious and therefore unexamined motivations to consciousness, especially when we are tempted to act in a rash manner.

Yom Kippur aims at reconciliation of the individual with God, and of man and woman with his or her fellow. There is a need for such an observance on an annual basis, because conflict, estrangement, and alienation are an all too common feature of human relationships. And we are always quick to blame “yener”, the other person (never “ich”, the self) for the breakdown in communication and the withdrawal of warmth, companionship, and affection. In his classic work *The Way of Man*, Martin Buber elaborated on the Chasidic teaching that “conflict-situations between [a person] ... and others are nothing but the effect of conflict-situations in his own soul.” Buber went on to quote the Chasidic master, Rabbi Bunam who taught: “You cannot find peace anywhere save in your own self...When a man has made peace with himself, he will be able to make peace in the whole world.”

Each year when I prepare my sermons for the Days of Awe, there seems to be a particular book that I have read in the course of the preceding months that has had an influence on me and the messages I deliver to the congregation. This past summer I became familiar with the work of a psychologist named James Hollis and, in particular, with his book *Why Good People Do Bad Things* (the title is an interesting take-off, is it not, on a much better known volume?). His key insight, which seems to echo the teaching of Rabbi Bunam, is that many of the problems and conflicts, much of the disquiet and unhappiness we experience in later life, result from unresolved conflicts that persist from our formative years – a domineering parent or an absent or inattentive one or one who was unable to communicate feelings of love; a thwarting of one’s true interests or creative impulses; or a repressive upbringing that regarded sexual urges as a source of shame. We develop strategies – ultimately doomed to failure – for satisfying unmet needs, for dealing with fears we harbor that are no longer even current or relevant, for handling these long-simmering conflicts which we often find ourselves re-enacting: addiction, avoidance of uncomfortable situations, and projection onto others of traits, thoughts and feelings of which we are ashamed.

One insight I drew from Hollis's book had a particular resonance for me. As a rabbi, I sometimes meet people who are alienated from the community, from family members, from one-time friends and acquaintances, people who, when they speak about others, have nothing but bitterness and anger. You probably know someone or maybe several someones like this. Such people, Hollis writes, need to step back and recognize that in all of the conflict-situations in which they find themselves, there is but one constant present – they themselves- and therein lies the problem – it is “ich”, I, with my needs for attention, approval, and validation that others can never satisfy, and not yene, the other folks, who may very well be at the root of alienation and estrangement.

Clergy are generalists, it has been said, dabbling in many different areas of knowledge in which they are not experts. Last week I spoke about finance, today I'm talking about psychology (of which my knowledge is admittedly sketchy). Perhaps, I should confine myself to being a teacher of Torah in a more narrow and circumscribed definition. And yet I believe there is something profoundly moral about what we can learn from the study of human behavior and emotions. We are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves, but it is impossible to fulfill this mitzvah, if we don't begin by loving and accepting ourselves. Having a healthy sense of self-esteem and a sense of who we are is the prerequisite for accomplishing good within the larger community.

Note that I said moral rather than moralistic. There is a distinction to be made. Hollis believes (and those who have extended counsel to me at troubling times in my own life would agree) that wholeness rather than perfection should be our goal. Too much of our respective religious traditions (our own included) points us to an ideal of perfection. You've probably heard all the tales about the saintliness of the great rabbis of past generations. You may not be as familiar with the Mussar movement that arose among Lithuanian Jews in the 19th century and its emphasis on perfecting one's personal ethical and moral attributes. Mussar or ethics has been an ongoing concern of Jewish tradition and a noted genre of religious literature in Hebrew from Medieval times. The 19th century movement of that name became very influential at the great Lithuanian yeshivot, whose administration included not only rashei yeshiva, known for their Talmudic scholarship but also a mashgiach ruchani, a spiritual overseer or supervisor, whose task it was to worry about the state of the young students' souls. Mussar was well-intentioned and

certainly a necessary corrective to dry scholasticism, but it frequently became harshly judgmental, rigorously ascetic, and totally destructive of the individual's ego. The excesses of Mussar's uncompromising rigor and perfectionism are masterfully depicted in the fiction of the Yiddish writer Chaim Grade.

Perfectionism leads to unremitting feelings of guilt and perhaps, because we can't dare admit to the least scintilla of fault on our own part, to projecting our shortcomings onto others. Wholeness means accepting that we are human – perfection belongs only to God. Wholeness means accepting and admitting to ourselves that we have thoughts and urges we wouldn't care to share with others in polite company, accepting that in our actions we don't always live up to what we know and believe to be right. Because we are human we have both a *yetzer hatov*, a good inclination, and what our tradition calls a *yetzer hara*, literally an evil inclination, but better understood as passion, ambition, energy (often sexual in nature). The rabbis believed that the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, was necessary to the ongoing functioning of human society and also that God could be served through both inclinations, if the *yetzer hara* was properly channeled and directed.

When I speak of accepting ourselves, I'm not suggesting that we become smug or complacent or that we refrain from trying to improve ourselves. And I'm certainly not implying that we should be casual about or dismissive of the hurts we have inflicted on others by word and deed. Accepting one's self does not negate ongoing efforts to change ourselves for the better and to repair the wrongs we've done. Acceptance is the opposite not of efforts toward self-improvement but of "beating ourselves up" for our failure to be perfect. Wholeness in Hebrew is called *shlemut*; it means a sense of well-being and is related to *shalom*, the peace of which Rabbi Bunam spoke.

This is the season for *cheshbon hanefesh*, for self-reckoning, and today's liturgy highlights the idea of *vidui* confession, acknowledging our faults before God. When not tainted by an unrealistic perfectionism, both are beneficial for the soul. I refrain from judging or criticizing yener, the other fellow, and I leave him to carry out his own self-accounting and to confess his own faults in the privacy and intimacy of his own communion with God. As for me, I accept that I'm not immortal, that I look my age, that I'm not always motivated by the most selfless and altruistic of purposes, that I'm not

perfect and have many faults as well as many thoughts that I'd be ashamed to articulate in public, and that I have been guilty of sins of commission as well as omission. I probably can't do too much about the looks or about the thoughts (which come from a place beyond my control). I certainly can't do anything about my mortality. But with God's help and through my own efforts, I can, during the course of the coming year, work on those faults and shortcomings become not perfect but a little smarter, a little more loving, more generous, more thoughtful and attentive. May God strengthen us in our worthy endeavors and grant us all a happy and healthy New Year.