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Saturday October 1, 2022

Shabbat Shuvah      Vayelech

I am going to talk about our High Holiday theme and then try to link it with this morning's Torah portion.

Our theme this year is reciprocity– mutuality- in relationship. Especially in our relationship to the land, but not just.

I want to begin with what in Islam is called the Principle of Ethical Reciprocity and which we call The Golden Rule. The principle occurs in many religions and has two basic forms:

One: Do not do to someone anything you wouldn't want them to do to you.

And: Do unto others as you would want others to do unto you.

There has been a lot written and said about which form is morally superior, but that's like asking which is better: a flathead screwdriver or a Phillips screwdriver? It depends on the situation you're in and it's best to have both in your tool kit.

But both forms of the Golden Rule, as essential and sacred as they are, have the same limitation: They tell us to decide how we treat others based on how *we* want to be treated; that is, we are being encouraged to take what *we* want and don't want and project it onto the other.

This is often a reasonable place to start, a decent first approximation (as long as we know it is only a first guess), but deeper mutuality asks us to do our best to attune to the wants – and needs – *of the other*.

And no matter how sensitive, empathic, good-willed, or confident we are, we can never know for sure what the other needs. We learn within the relationship, and we are always learning. We learn by attuning to, paying attention to, how the other actually responds to our words and actions towards them.

When my son was a newborn – thirty-four years ago – his cries put me in a panic because I didn't know what they meant; I didn't know what he needed. I would try the usual suspects – hold him, change him, feed him, burp him – and most of the time that worked.

But as I got better at attuning to him – as I learned about who *he* was – I got better at knowing what his different cries meant (and learning that, in fact, he had different cries that could be attuned to).

But never perfectly: there were times when nothing I tried completely helped him. All I could do was be with him and attune to him – it’s like I was following him – bearing his distress as best I could and bearing the distress that came up in me in response. In those times, I often prayed – just saying “Help me” over and over, asking and then listening for new ideas as they came to me (if they came to me)– a new song to sing to him, a new way to hold him, a new rhythm as I walked and moved with him.

Sometimes I had to accept I couldn’t fix it, that all I could do was feel my own distress and his distress echoing within me and do my best to digest that distress within me and re-center myself if I could – and sometimes that somehow helped him; it was like I followed him, and he could follow me and better digest his own experiences.

And, of course, just when I felt confident that I knew how to care for him as a newborn, he became an infant, then a baby, then a toddler, then a kid, and so on. He kept on, and keeps on, being himself.

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The British novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch wrote: “Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.”

I think that this is what Martin Buber means when he talks about “I – Thou” relationships in contrast to “I – It” relationships.

The psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott focuses on how we humans develop (or fail to develop) the capacity to experience that we are in relationship to other beings and things that have an existence independent of us; they are more than bundles of our projections; they are not us–in–disguise; they are not merely furniture in our personal reality, actors who are supposed to recite their lines and play the parts we consciously and unconsciously assign to them. They don’t live in our reality (and we don’t live in theirs) – we and they are living in a shared, interconnected, much larger reality. It is in fact extremely difficult to develop this capacity and is always a work in progress.

So, for instance, to be in reciprocity with the land we live in, on, and with, we must be able to experience that the land has its own existence, never completely knowable; that the land is not there so that we can own it or live on it or make money from it or make it feed us or make it beautiful for us. We learn to meet the land where it is, to engage with the land as we want to engage with people and as we want to treat ourselves, and as we want others to treat us – we engage with the land with curiosity, affection, and humility so that we can attune to it, knowing we will never do so perfectly. We pay attention to how the land responds. And sometimes, being in relationship to the land means feeling and digesting the wonders, distress, and grief that echo within us and then following that experience to doing the next right thing.

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Rabbi David has often said that Torah never explicitly commands us to believe in God but does forbid us to make idols and substitute them for God. In the language I am using this morning: Torah and the Jewish spiritual path tells me that I shouldn't believe in a God that is merely me-in-disguise, merely a bundle of my projections, my needs, my limitations, my disavowed parts, and my prejudices.

This is a major theme in Torah. Sometimes (and only sometimes) that theme is expressed in examples and guidelines that help us forge a true I–Thou relationship with the divine, and, just as importantly, with others; with the land, sea, air, and all the creatures in the world; and with our own inner selves. The laws of shmita and jubilee, the Book of Ruth are examples.

But often- often- Torah expresses the theme of reciprocity through negative examples, by devolving into an image of God that *we* have created with *our* projections.

In this morning's Torah portion, Vayelech, "God" (with quotation marks) goes on a long rant about how everything would be okay if people just did everything God tells them to; but they won't, we won't; so, "God" will become narcissistically wounded and therefore punitive and that's why bad things happen.

This version of God isn't willing (or even capable) of acknowledging our humanness and of then engaging with us as we are, because this version comes from the part of us that isn't willing or capable in the moment of engaging with ourselves or with others or with life – as we all are- engaging in complicated relationships that are messy: sometimes hurtful and disappointing; sometimes sacred and loving.

A Torah portion like Vayelech is valuable to me because it can help me recognize the pieces of being human that I, personally, and we, collectively, project out onto our image of God, onto other people, onto all of existence; and I can work to engage with these disavowed pieces within me. Then Teshuva becomes a psychological, spiritual, and social justice practice, an ongoing path of learning how to attend to and attune to Reality as it is; Reality in all its manifestations- our planet, ourselves, the people in our life, our society. Teshuva becomes learning, by experience, how to meet reality as an alive, interconnected web of relationships within me and beyond me. Teshuvah becomes learning to live and love with all our heart.

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Clearly, the land, sea, air, and all living creatures benefit when we can treat them with mutuality and reciprocity.

And we benefit when we can treat ourselves that way.

And other people benefit when we honor, celebrate, and engage with their unique personhood.

And: it is also true that *we* benefit – greatly – when we realize that the other is actually an other, with their own reality, existence, and needs. *We* benefit because, if the universe and everything in it is simply me–in–disguise, then any kind of nourishment that I might receive is also me–in–disguise, bits of my own energy endlessly recycled through my own projections, about as tasty and nutritious as yesterday’s bubble gum.

But when we can get to reciprocity – with others and with ourselves – we become available to receiving, taking in, and incorporating nurturance and nourishment that is genuinely from another, when that’s available, and we become better able to truly nurture ourselves when we can and when we need to. The Jewish ritual of saying blessings as many times in the day as possible helps us to let go of the illusion that everything comes from us and, instead, helps us experience the joys of life as coming to us, at least in part, from something we are in relationship with, something other than ourselves. And this helps us meet ourselves as we are.

Martin Buber wrote, “I become through my relationship to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting.”

I so remember the very first time my son, still an infant, smiled at me – smiled not because he had just gotten fed or had satisfyingly just passed gas – but because I had just entered the room. That first smile lasted only a microsecond and it is still here, within me, still a source of joy and nourishment.





