

Why Are We Here Personally?

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 2015 (5776)

The theme for this year's sermons from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur is one key question – Why Are We Here? Last night, we looked at why are we here in services, and I explained my belief that we're here in services to change the world. I talked of the Dominant Social Matrix, which is the way our society currently functions, and the need for a New Social Matrix, as defined by democratic, liberal religious narrative.

What I didn't do was explore the original question, which was “Why are we here?” The question is framed in the plural form and not in the singular. I didn't ask “Why am I here?” which at first glance may have been a perfectly appropriate question to ask at a time of personal *teshuvah*, of individualised return to God. So why did I choose “we” and not “I?” Isn't “Why am I here?” a perfectly valid question at this time?

This actually connects to last night's sermon. The Dominant Social Matrix is all about the individual, all about the success of each individual person. Success is defined in comparison with others – if you are wealthier than them, happier than them, and so on. We live in a society that treasures the individual. And is there anything wrong with that? We're all unique people, we all have differing needs and aspirations and talents. Why can't we try to reach our own full potential?

In religious terms, we cannot pretend that the individual is not often key. “*Adonai s'fatai tiftach, ufi yagid t'hilatecha*” – “MY Eternal God, open up MY lips so that MY mouth may declare your praise.” “*Elohai n'shama shenatata bi t'horah hi*” – “MY God, the soul you have given ME is pure.” “*V'ahavta et adonai elohecha*,

b'chol l'vav'cha, uv'chol nafsh'cha, uv'chol m'odecha – “You, singular, shall love the Eternal your God with all YOUR heart (singular) and all YOUR soul (singular) and all YOUR might (singular).” Those are three of many examples in the liturgy. And in larger Jewish texts, in Rabbinic codes like Talmud, and in Jewish philosophy as it has developed over the last two thousand years, the individual relationship to God has been key. In the Talmud, the Rabbis laid out a very clear doctrine of individual reward and punishment, a doctrine that explains what happens to good individuals and what happens to bad individuals. That doctrine formed the basis for this entire season, with a historical focus on each of us getting our own individual name into the Book of Life. As they say in Talmud,¹ “Seven things were created before the Universe came into being. They are: Torah, repentance, Paradise, *Gehinnom*, the Throne of Glory, the Sanctuary, and the name of the Messiah.” Repentance, Paradise and *Gehinnom*, which is a kind of purgatory where the Rabbis believed most of us go for cleansing before moving on to Paradise, are three concepts completely tailored for individuals. Individuals go through a personal process of repentance and, according to the Rabbis, each is given a seat in *Gehinnom* or *Gan Eden*, Paradise, according to our individual deeds.

Throughout Jewish philosophy, the connection of the individual to God remained paramount. Even thinkers such as Maimonides wrote of what it meant for each human being to live on, and concluded that the abstract learning that we had achieved during our life is what remains of us. He wrote about the Palace², a metaphor for God, in which the closest relationship to God is in the inner courtyard. The people outside the palace are, according to Maimonides, “those... who have no doctrinal belief, neither one based on speculation nor one that accepts

¹ Pesachim 54a

² Guide for the Perplexed 3:51

the authority of tradition.” So if an individual has no belief then they join others who are similar in being excluded from God’s presence. Drawing closer into the inner part of the Palace, though, Maimonides explains his belief that “as long as you are engaged in studying the mathematical sciences and the art of logic, you are one of those who walk around the house searching for its gate... . If, however, you have understood the natural things, you have entered the habitation and are walking in the antechambers. If, however, you have achieved perfection in the natural things and have understood divine science, you have entered in the ruler’s place into the inner court and are with him in one habitation.” What Maimonides is saying, then, is that the more an individual commits themselves to intellectual process, the closer that individual gets to God. There clearly exists, then, a strong strand within Judaism that focuses on the individual connection to God and on God’s response to each and every individual. That strand, supported through philosophy and liturgy, would certainly give credence to the question “Why am I here?” The answer given by the traditional liturgy is, of course, to atone and to return to God, to get your name written into the book of life, to have a successful next year.

There’s another Jewish philosopher, though, whose philosophy is what pointed me to asking “Why are we here?” instead of “Why am I here?” In 1923, Martin Buber published *Ich und Du*, which is most often translated as *I and Thou*. In it, Buber talks of two differing kinds of relationship, which he terms I-It and I-Thou. Just as last night I suggested that everything we do is framed through narrative, Buber sees everything as being framed through these two overarching types of relationship. The I-It relationship is the one of objective relationship. It’s the relationship between two separate beings, coming together for a connection. I-It is how we relate to the world and everyone in it almost all of the time. We exist in

our sphere and they – whoever or whatever we are relating to – exist in theirs. And that's fine but it's also limited. The second kind of relationship, which is extremely rare, is the I-Thou encounter. That is where the self is totally lost in the encounter, where the encounter is not bounded in any way. The I-Thou encounter cannot be explained, because to explain it means objectifying and measuring it and that is contrary to its very being. The I-Thou relationship isn't a means to an end but is an end in itself. God, to Buber, is the Eternal Thou. So to Buber we cannot describe God but in moments of I-Thou relationship, we experience God.

How does this affect our original question of “Why are we here?” instead of “Why am I here?” Buber clearly talks of the self – I-It and I-Thou, not We-It and We-Thou. That, of course, makes sense, because everyone encounters everyone and everything else in this world differently. We don't have a shared experience or encounter of anything. But the way I read his work suggests to me that in the moments of I-Thou encounter, the self is no longer important, or, perhaps better, the self is merely a grounding in a much larger shared experience that is no longer about the self. What Buber is not saying is that “there is no I,” of course there is. It's just that when we're meeting God, the I, the self, is not as important. We live in two minds, in two relationships, the I-It and the I-Thou. And interestingly, that is how Jewish tradition presents the relationship, too. Early Judaism, for example, the Judaism of Torah, was not a Judaism for individuals but, rather, for a community. When God was angry in Torah, God usually wiped out unnamed individuals. Even *Sh'ma*, the central prayer of Jewish theology, switches between “you” (singular) and “you” (plural) in its later paragraphs. And, of course, our prayers talk of God in the plural “*Adonai eloheinu*” – “The Eternal *our* God;” “*asher bacher banu*” – “God Who chose US,” and, of course, “*Ashamnu*” – “WE have sinned.”

Our tradition, and thus our liturgy, speaks in two voices. It speaks in a voice of individualism and it speaks in a voice of community. The voice of individualism has been dominant for a very long time and that is why I ask “Why are we here?” Because just like Buber, we can live as individuals or we can place our individuality firmly within the context of community. Everyone is an individual, but human beings are social creatures who need community. Individuals need community as much as community needs individuals. What we’re ultimately looking for is to move beyond I-It and into I-Thou, into a transcendent relationship within community whereby we encounter God in community. Why am I here? To be part of a community of meaning. Why are WE here? That’s the harder question. That’s a question about being grounded in the self but also transcending the bounds of the self. Not denying the self because that is not possible, but, rather, not being limited by it. When we say “*Ashamnu*” – “We have sinned,” we are reminded by our liturgy that we are all intimately connected. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*³ - all Israel are responsible one for the other, say the Rabbis. We are all connected. We are not just individuals, but connected individuals. There is no such thing as I, there is only I in the context of relationship to others.

So, why are we here? To be reminded of that fact. To be reminded that no-one is an island, that everything that we do impacts others, whether we know it or not. The world teeters on a knife-edge of billions of interactions all affecting each other, with the literal power of life and death as an eternal consequence of being in community. This is why in *Ashamnu* we acknowledge the mistakes we have made knowingly and unknowingly. And yet, the more we define ourselves in community... the more our own “I” is in relationship with others, the less we harm others unknowingly. We are here to be reminded that we only exist in relationship

³ Talmud: Shavuot 39a

to others, and that we therefore have to explore every relationship and make it as deep, powerful and transformative as we can. That is real *teshuvah*, that is why we're here today. So, may God help us with that real *teshuvah*, that real acknowledging of the true self, our best self, within the context of community. And let us say, Amen.