

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 D'var Torah
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What is Judaism For? Sensibilities, Emergence and the Dot of Goodness

Compiled by Reb Sherril Gilbert, with gratitude to R' Chava Bahle, R' Debra Orenstein, & R' Avraham Greenbaum, Margaret Wheatley; Judaism Unbound podcast; and to Rabbi Hannah Dresner for the spark of the idea.

So there is this passenger sitting on a train and he is watching with astonishment this older man across the aisle who keeps repeating the same behaviours, over and over again. First the old man is mumbling a few words to himself, then he smiles, and finally he raises his hand and stops talking for a few moments.

After watching this strange behaviour for close to an hour, the passenger could not keep quiet any longer, and says, "Excuse me sir, but I couldn't help noticing what you were doing. Is anything wrong?"

"Not at all," replies the old man. "You see, whenever I take a trip, I get bored. And so I always tell myself jokes, which is why I was smiling."

"But why did you keep raising your hand?"

"Oh, that. It's to interrupt myself because I've heard that joke before."¹

Okay, next.

Schwartz is sitting in his room, wearing only a top hat, when Steinberg strolls in.

"Why are you sitting here naked?"

"It's all right," says Schwartz. "Nobody comes to visit."

"But why the hat?"

"Maybe somebody will come."

You GET it, right? These jokes are funny because they speak to our neshamot – our Jewish souls. Somehow, we know these are Jewish jokes – there is something about the characters and their ways of being in the world that we immediately understand and connect with.

I think that the unique contribution of Judaism to the world is that it has this ability to infuse our lives with meaning and purpose and often wisdom

¹ The Big Book of Jewish Humour, Eds. William Novak and Moshe Waldoks

through a wide range of what the scholar Vanessa Ochs and others have called *Jewish sensibilities*. Jewish sensibilities are particularly Jewish ways of thinking about what it means to be truly human, ways of being in the world that guide and orient how we speak, act, and make choices.²

These sensibilities comprise a sort of unarticulated and undocumented “code” that we try to follow — and even judge ourselves by. They originate in Jewish texts and teachings, in the stories we have told and re-told from biblical times to the present day, in our individual and collective experiences that have shaped these narratives, and in the lessons that have been derived about how to live a worthy and fulfilling life. It’s a sort of code that overlaps but is not synonymous with the requirements of Jewish law or traditional practice.

Some examples of Jewish sensibilities include things like making Shabbat; doing t’shuvah; following the rhythms and cycles of the Jewish year; treating others with dignity and honour; being a mensch; maintaining shalom bayit; meaning keeping the peace; and doing tikkun olam, or social justice.

There are many other micro-narratives we have integrated into our tradition. We say *gam zu l’tovah* – this too is for the good – to help get us through tough times, almost as if saying it will make it come true. And the concept of *gerim hayitem* – remembering that we were once strangers - is central to our human rights efforts with immigrants and refugees.

Over and over again I find that these sensibilities, these practices, are a lifeline for me in living a Jewishly meaningful, responsible, compassionate life, even – or especially - during those times when the world feels dark.

Recently I was listening to my new favourite podcast called *Judaism Unbound*. It was episode 71, and the hosts were engaged in a dialogue that centered around the question of *Pourquoi Judaism* – literally, For What is Judaism, or What is Judaism for? One of the hosts said that according to their podcast guest Rabbi Irwin Kula, Judaism exists to allow for human flourishing, and if Judaism is *not* resulting in human flourishing, then it’s not doing its job.

² <http://forward.com/shma-now/jewish-sensibilities/>

I think human flourishing is a good answer to the question of what is Judaism for, but it's only part of the answer. We could say human flourishing, sure – but that's a project of most of the other “isms” too, “isms” that we call world religions.

I think that if we are going to identify with what Judaism does in particular, *within* the realm of human flourishing, we have a little bit of a tougher time, but I feel like it has something to do with the sensibilities I was talking about and also with the quantum physics principle of *emergence*. I'll come back to the sensibilities in a minute. First I want to talk about emergence.

Emergence refers to the existence or formation of collective behaviours — what parts of a system do together that they would not do alone.

Emergence refers to how behaviours that exist on a larger scale arise from a finer scale of detailed interactions and structures of relationships, patterns of behaviours, habits of belief, and methods for accomplishing work.

Emergence provides simple evidence that we live in a complex relational world. Relationships change us, reveal us, evoke more from us. We do not live in a natural world that encourages separateness.³

Emergence is a common phenomenon found everywhere in life. The tower-building termites of Africa and Australia are a particularly stunning example – working alone, they accomplish little - they dig only modest piles of dirt. But working together, a collective forms. As a group, they become builders of these immense towers – engineering marvels filled with arches, tunnels, air conditioning systems, and specialized chambers. These intricate towers are the largest structures on earth if you consider the size of their builders.

And no one leader termite directs the enterprise. All participate, doing what seems required as they observe the behaviour of others. With antennae waving, they bump up against one another, notice what's going on and respond. Acting locally to accomplish what seems to be next, they build complex structures that can last for centuries. *Without any professional engineers, their arches meet in the middle.*

³ A Simpler Way, Margaret Wheatley

Emergence is so common to our experience, but often we don't recognize it. We believe we must rigorously plan everything into existence. But with most successful human activity, we see that what really leads to success is the capacity of *people*. We make things happen by responding in the moment and by changing *ourselves* as we go along. An emergent world invites us to use all of our human capacities with awareness.

Emergence is inherent in the enterprise of Judaism. Locale by locale, individuals and groups interact to figure out what works for us. We exchange information, we adapt, we engage, and from our efforts, a system emerges with its own identity, its own characteristics, its own purpose. These parts, taken together, could not be mistaken for anything else but Judaism. And when these parts are taken individually, they cannot do on their own what can be done when they are working together.

Now, you might or might not agree with my reasoning here, my way of thinking about Judaism as a *complex system that has human flourishing as one of its purposes, which it accomplishes in part through this unique set of attributes we call Jewish sensibilities*.

So, you know what? It's okay if you don't agree with me, because one of these Jewish sensibilities is the notion of *elu v'elu*, meaning "these and these...". Drawn from a mishnaic narrative, where it is applied to the opposing views of Talmudic scholars, *elu v'elu* refers to a particularly Jewish way of approaching the world that suggests there may be more than one correct answer to a given question.

Because Judaism really and truly is interested in the concept of deep debate, and that is healthy, and there is a huge value in bringing people into the world that cherish text study and argument for the sake of learning.

You know the old saying, "Two Jews, three opinions." If you know Jewish families, and Jewish communities, this is funny because it just rings so true. When set against our overall Canadian or Quebec culture, it is an example of one distinguishing and unique characteristic of *Jewish* culture.

And it points not only toward a specific piece of knowledge or a specific action, but *mamash*, a way of being in the world – one that makes room for diversity, engenders humility, and provides a powerful interpersonal communication technique, if done well. And, frankly, it's very Jewish.

When my heart sinks in despair at the entrenched systems of suffering and oppression in the world, when Facebook keeps displaying photos of farbludget politicians, when there are days when nothing seems to be going right, I know I can turn to my tradition's ingrained sensibilities to help me return to a grounded path.

One of these Jewish sensibilities is the concept of *nekudot tovot* – the idea that there is some measure of goodness, even a tiny dot, in every human. I find myself needing to believe now, with every ounce of my being, in this sensibility.

And it makes sense, at this time, to connect this notion of *nekudot tovot* to another Jewish sensibility - *tshuvah*. This month, this season, is the home base for the powerful practice of *tshuvah*, which means “to turn, to return, or to respond”. *Tshuvah* involves the healing of what keeps us separate from others and from God - the universe, the Great Mystery - separate from being who we really are. The practice of *tshuvah* begins with the recognition and perhaps the revelation of the deep truth about ourselves: that our divinely-given, natural human state is one of goodness.

And so how are we supposed to begin this process of returning to our natural state? How do we take steps towards being our best selves, and how do we create the space for others to do so?

We come back to *elu v'elu* – these and these. Maimonides, the Rambam, suggested in his Laws of *Tshuvah* that we should begin by identifying all those things that we did *wrong*, to articulate and enumerate them, and then to confess to them. From there, the Rambam says, we can do the work of not repeating such actions and behaviours.

Then, there is Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the great chasidic rabbi, who offers an alternative approach, one which definitely speaks to me. Rather than beginning from what's going *wrong*, he teaches that *tshuvah* begins with

identifying and acknowledging what's going *right* and what is *good*, and then we amplify that. Rebbe Nachman taught throughout his life that there is no person, no condition, and no expanse of time without some measure of good in it.

For Rebbe Nachman, the amount of good that is needed is *me-at ha-tov* – the tiniest bit of good. “That is all you need to find,” he taught. “Just the smallest bit, just a dot of goodness.”

But you know, this can actually be one of the hardest things for us to do. We can all think of people who we know, people who have not exactly been exemplars of goodness, people we think of as evil. And yet in Rebbe Nachman's teaching, we are counseled that, for our own well-being - *for our own well-being* - we must do our best to focus on finding the good in other people.

“Know,” he wrote, “that you must judge all people favourably. Even if you have reason to think that a person is completely wicked, you must search until you find some bit of goodness, some place in that person where he is not evil. In that good place inside of him, he is not bad! Treating people this way allows them – and you - to be restored, to come to *tshuvah*.”

Rebbe Nachman's prescription for happiness is the same as his prescription for repentance, which is the same as his prescription for forgiveness, which is the same as his prescription for gratitude. For Rebbe Nachman, it's all one process. Amidst the bad, look for one good point, and then look for another, and then look for another, and then expand the good points, and attach them to one another, until you weave something together that is made up of genuine goodness – even if it started out mostly bad.

This teaching, this important sensibility, is Rebbe Nachman's gift to those of us who struggle to let go of grudges, to see beyond frustrating personality traits, to open our hearts to people who may have hurt us. And sometimes, says the Rebbe, full forgiveness is too much of a challenge to achieve in one go. Even so, we should not be discouraged. Even taking that one step, seeing that one tiny dot of goodness in another human being, is a worthy exercise, because our small step will elevate both of us.

And Rebbe Nachman does not stop with this tremendous idea. He goes on to encourage us to do something that may be even more challenging: he instructs us to extend this position of open-heartedness, of lovingkindness, of belief in human goodness, to *ourselves*.

He says that, “You have to search until you find some point of good in yourself to restore your inner vitality and attain joy. And by searching for and finding some little bit of good inside of you, you genuinely move from the scale of guilt onto the scale of merit.”

Rebbe Nachman’s orientation toward goodness is a powerful corrective to a strange misconception that some of us lug around from one High Holiday season to the next. It’s a common mistake to imagine that repentance is effected by a sufficient amount of beating oneself up. I am here to tell you that, if that were going to work, it would have worked by now. The Rebbe is teaching that you don’t get rid of the dark by yelling, “Darkness, go away!” You have to find a spark and turn it into a flame, and then light a candle, and then use that candle as a *shammes* to light other candles. My friends, if this is not a prescription for human flourishing, I don’t know what is.

And so this is where, I believe, our Jewish sensibilities fit in. They are fundamental elements, building blocks of the system we call Judaism. They are an essential part of the system’s structure that allows for human flourishing as a Jewish collective. Can we agree that finding the good in ourselves and one another is a worthwhile endeavour?

This particular sensibility, of finding the good, is so integral to our enterprise that it is found in our very first story, the story that we give honour to at this time of year. In this story, as part of the process of creation, we see that God took regular breaks to stand back and celebrate the work that had been completed so far.

In the beginning, God created light, and saw that it was good.

Then God created dry land and sea, and saw that it was good.

Then God created grasses and fruit trees, and saw that it was good.

And God created sun and moon to rule over day and night, and to distinguish between light and dark, and saw that it was good.

And God created fishes and winged birds, and saw that it was good.
Then God created animals that walked or crawled on the earth, and saw that it was good.
And finally, on the sixth day, God created human beings. “And God saw everything that God had made, and behold – *tov me-od* – it was *very good*.”

The world was created in goodness. And since creation is an ongoing process, that means that there are sparks of goodness to be found everywhere. This season of renewal, as we engage with one another, as we engage with this enterprise that we call Judaism, may we open our hearts to see the good that is there – the good in our world, in each other, and in ourselves.

May we be given every kind of good in the New Year. And may we make of all we are given a *shana tova* – a truly good year.

And let us say, Amen!