

The Great Truth (September 2006)

Each day of the year we watch the world with probing eyes in our interminable search for clarity and truth. We seek answers to questions we know how to ask but don't know how to answer. We can see what's wrong but righting it seems so elusive. And by end of the day—and end of the year—hope succumbs to resignation, even despair.

The real problem with the world, however, is in our failure to accept the challenge that its resolution belongs entirely to me. It's not what the American President or the Israeli Prime Minister can do. It's not about the elusive terrorist or the chairman of the Federal Reserve. And it's not about our parents and our lovers. It's about me. Just as the Talmud teaches that to save a human life is to save the entire world, we learn that each of us is—in the truest sense—a microcosm.

Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorki once went to his teacher, Rabbi David of Lelov, for help with his marriage. His wife was, in his words, "troublesome." Rabbi David said to him, "Why do you speak to me? Speak to yourself." Martin Buber explains it thus: "At first a man should himself realize that conflict-situations between himself and others are nothing but the effects of conflict-situations in his own soul; then he should try to overcome this inner conflict, so that afterwards he may go out to his fellow-man and enter into new, transformed relationships with them." You must begin with yourself. So taught the 'great soul' Gandhi: "You must be the change you want to see in the world."

Individually, we cannot change the world. We can make it a little better. Indeed, we are commanded to do so. But we cannot truly fix it. Not the world "out there." Tikkun Olam ("Repair of the World") in its kabbalistic formulation is less about social justice than it is about repairing the broken-ness of our internal cosmic beings. Such that if each of us were to just try to do this, if each person in the universe—all at the same time—sought to correct the broken aspects of his or her soul, then the external universe's balance could be restored. Of course we have no guarantee that the other person will do the same, but then again we can't do anything about that (no matter how often we try). We can only really affect change for ourselves. So in an affirmation that our personal goal is this internal repair but which is done "for the sake of" the external world, we formally gather to embrace the mitzvah together. Each year, having failed during the previous twelve (or thirteen) months, we set about to start all over. Again.

I have no great wisdom to offer for the problems that lay so heavily on our hearts these days. Terrorism, armed conflict, racism, unimaginable suffering still fill our world—just like last year. Alas, I'm no different either. The private confession I made last Yom Kippur was no different than it has been for all my fast days before. And it probably will be the same again this year. Only maybe this time I'll really do something about it. For if there is one thing that is absolutely true, it must be that no one else will do the repair for me—because no one else can.