Reclaiming Humanity

by
Rabbi Stacy Petersohn
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On a warm day in November 2017, I found myself standing in a forest area, somewhere between Haifa and Jerusalem. Unless you know what to look for, it would be impossible to recognize this place as the village it used to be seventy years earlier. My colleagues and I were listening to Feisal Mehajne recount the story of this village.

For Feisal, the story of this village was deeply personal; before it became a casualty of war, this village was his family's home. Feisal could show us where his grandparents' house was, the olive trees they harvested, he even pointed out the mosque that had been preserved by the kibbutz next door. During our time with Feisal, there was one thing he said that truly struck a chord with me: "*Ani Aravi, Ani Muslimi, Ani Palestinai, Ani Ezrach Yisrael, aval mikol makom, Ani Ben Adam.* I am an Arab, I am a Muslim, I am a Palestinian, I am a citizen of Israel, but above all else, I am a human being."

Five years later, and these words still echo in my heart. It seems like the simplest thing, to recognize those around us are human beings, and yet it is challenging at the same time. Unfortunately, we don't need to look far to see the dangerous consequences of failing to see others as human. Migrants have been unceremoniously dropped in random locations with no warning or aid, being used as political pawns. Young men and women mistreated and shot by the police for nothing more than the color of their skin. The ongoing assault on the Ukrainian people; accepted as if it were inevitable. Women being stripped of their reproductive rights across this country.

Yes, these are all extreme examples, ones that come up in the news with sensational headlines, that generate debate on 24-hour news stations and late-night satirical comedy shows. So here are a few examples of dehumanization that might hit a bit closer to home: using inappropriate language to talk about people, gossiping behind someone's back, focusing on a person's hair and clothing, using physical presence to intimidate a person in the midst of a conversation by invading their physical space.

Why do we do this? What do we hope to achieve by dehumanizing others? Perhaps it all has to do with ego. The 20th century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber once said, "Egos appear by setting themselves

apart from other egos. Persons appear by entering into relationship with other persons." According to Buber, when we dehumanize others, we are concerned about our own self-importance, bolstering up our image of ourselves to make ourselves feel better. Yet, increasing our sense of self-importance comes with a price; we willingly forgo creating true, lasting connections with people in our own lives.

In January 1963, several religious coalitions came together in Chicago, Illinois for The National Conference on Religion and Race. The purpose of the conference was to address "the distinctive role that religion and religious institutions have to play in removing racial segregation and securing acceptance for all Americans." One of the many speakers at this conference was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel was no stranger to the dangers that racism posed for humanity. In 1938, he was deported from Frankfurt, Germany to Warsaw, Poland by the Gestapo. Weeks before the invasion of Poland, he was able to escape due to the hard work of former Hebrew Union College president, Rabbi Julian Morgenstern. However, the rest of Heschel's family died at the hands of the Nazis before the war ended.

In his address to the Conference on Religion and Race, Heschel declared, "Religion and race. How can the two be uttered together? To act in

the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God's beloved child. To act in the spirit of race is to sunder, to slash, to dismember the flesh of living humanity. Is this the way to honor a father: to torture his child? How can we hear the word 'race' and feel no self-reproach?"

Nearly 60 years later, Heschel's words ring out with the truth of one who witnessed the absolute worst that humanity has to offer. And yet, this was only the beginning. Heschel went on to say that "racism is worse than idolatry. Racism is…unmitigated evil. Few of us seem to realize how insidious, how radical, how universal an evil racism is. Few of us realize that racism is man's gravest threat to man, the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason, the maximum of cruelty for a minimum of thinking. Perhaps this Conference should have been called 'Religion or Race'. You cannot worship God and at the same time look at man as if he were a horse."

Heschel's words may sound harsh to the modern ear. His passion emerged from trying to combat the same behaviors he bore witness to twenty-five years earlier. The tremendous nature of his words does not stop at his passion. If the topic was changed to any divisive concept that we can think of: sexism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, or any other form of

discrimination, Heschel's speech would still bear the same message: we are one.

So why am I talking about this today? Today is Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, a day that arguably has a split personality. On the one hand, we are supposed to be celebrating a new year and all of the promise and sweetness it has to offer; on the other, we are standing before God, ready to be judged based on our actions from the past year.

Rosh Hashanah is also known as the birthday of the world. And yet, we know that God did not snap God's fingers to create the world in a single day, rather, God created the world over six days. Our tradition tells us that Rosh Hashanah falls specifically on the sixth day of creation, the final day when God created *ha-adam*, the first human being. In fact, the rabbis thought that the creation of *ha-adam* was so important that they broke down the account of the day to each hour in God's process. And our tradition goes further, stating that when God created humanity, God initially created *ha-adam* alone "due to the importance of maintaining peace among people, so that one person will not say to another: My father is greater than your father."

Despite the fact that Jewish tradition often wrestles between universalistic human concepts and particularly Jewish ones, it fervently maintains the simple truth that we are all part of one human family.

Today is the day that we must seize the opportunity to act courageously in the cause of human equality, equity, and dignity. To remember that differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open. To face the choice between what is right, and what is easy. Now, I know that we cannot fix all of our society's problems in a day. But each of us can do our own small part. And each of us can start with ourselves and our own actions. As Martin Buber said, our own humanity can only appear when we recognize the humanity in those around us.

This brings me back to Feisal and his declaration in an unassuming Israeli forest. In that moment with those five statements, our humanity emerged as we connected with one another. Though it is a few years later, I proudly reply: *Ani Isha, Ani Yehudiyah, Ani Amerikai, aval mikol makom, Ani Bat Adam*. I am a woman, I am a Jew, I am an American, but above all else, I am a human being.