

Who Am I: Confronting Ourselves

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Since I spoke last year about *Fiddler on the Roof* on the High Holidays and why I believe it is the seminal story of our people, I thought it appropriate to open my sermon this year with reference to another one of my favorite Broadway shows.

I don't know about you, but every time I see or hear the music of *Les Miserables* I feel inspired and am moved. It is such a perfect masterpiece. Whenever I hear or see it I truly sense the presence of God and of a divine hand at work.

One of the most powerful and inspiring moments comes early in the show. The main character Jean Valjean who had stolen a loaf of bread as a young man, had turned his life around, and become the respectable mayor and owner of a large factory employing many workers. After saving someone's life his true identity is suspected by Javert, his relentless pursuer intent upon seeing to it that he serve his full punishment. He can either continue to live his life as it is or admit who he is, knowing that this may come at the cost of his freedom and giving up everything he has built up and created. He concludes his stirring soliloquy where he ponders what to do by boldly proclaiming his true identity.

*Can I conceal myself for evermore?
Pretend I'm not the man I was before?
And must my name until I die
Be no more than an alibi?
Must I lie?
How can I ever face my fellow men?
How can I ever face myself again?
My soul belongs to God, I know
I made that bargain long ago
He gave me hope when hope was gone
He gave me strength to journey on
Who am I? Who am I?
I am Jean Valjean!*

I speak about this song and pivotal moment in the play because today, and throughout the *Yamim HaNoraim*, the Ten Days of Awe each of us is called upon to consider the same question Jean Valjean confronted: who am I.

Our commentators understood this to be the true meaning of God's query to Adam, the first human and the very first question ever asked. After he ate of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, God asked Adam, one word, "*ayecha*", which means, "Where are you?"

Our rabbis explain God was not asking Adam where he was physically. Being omniscient, he knew where Adam was. Rather, God was demanding that the first human being account for where he is on a deeper more profound level, a question which is posed to each and every person throughout all ages, especially at this time of year.

On Rosh Hashana we are asked to stop and take a probing, intensely introspective assessment of ourselves. This is the central issue and eternal challenge to consider on Rosh Hashana, to do a *din veheshbon*, an accounting of our soul. Who are we and where are we in life.

These questions lead us to reflect on our relationships, on what is important to us, on what goals we should have for the coming year, on how we should try to live our lives and what kind of people we should aspire to be.

With the onset of a new year, we pause to think back on the year that has passed as we stand at the precipice not just of the New Year, but of the future. I hope when you listen to the prayers and when you recite them you will appreciate the underlying message subliminally woven into the undercurrent of all of the prayers. You have been granted an extension on your lease, the lease of life. How did you use the time allotted to you in the past year, and how will you use the time allotted to you in the coming year?

Thinking about it in these terms, the question, “who am I?” is actually much more related to the theme of Rosh Hashana than “If I were A Rich Man.”

Jackie Mason used to joke about a guy who goes to see a psychiatrist to find out who he really is. When the therapist tells him he isn’t who he thinks he is, but is masquerading as someone else the patient says to his doctor, “So if he’s me, and I’m not me, send that guy the bill. Why should I have to pay the bill for his therapy?”

It’s like the joke about the guy who tells his doctor he is concerned about his brother, because his brother thinks he’s a chicken. The doctor asks why they don’t take him to see someone and get some help. The man says, “We would. But we need the eggs.”

If we know who we are and have a clear sense of our identity we have greater confidence and are better able to function in the world and to confront life’s challenges.

Remember when you were a kid and you wanted to be sure that the peas on your plate didn’t touch the mashed potatoes. The reality of today’s world is far more complicated and defies easy compartmentalization and clearly defined boundaries and distinctions. The concept of separation is consistent with the underlying principle of kashrut.

After all, we Jews designate food as either *fleishik* if it is meat, or *milchik* if it is dairy, and they are to be kept separate. There is a third category - *parve*, for foods that are neither *milchik* nor *fleishik*, such as fish or eggs, and which can be eaten with either meal. Everything else is *trafe*.

So what are we to make of the latest advertising campaign by Hebrew National, the most famous kosher brand whose claim, “we answer to a higher authority” is recognized as one of the most well-known advertising campaigns of all times? They have a new video on their webpage where they suggest grilling their kosher hot dogs with cheese or bacon. The video ends with the tagline, “Why Hebrew National? Because when your hot dog’s kosher, that’s a hot dog you can trust.”

I realize that many of the people who buy kosher products might not keep kosher, and many may not even be Jewish, but still – with Hebrew National telling people to grill kosher hot dogs with cheese and

bacon, I can't help but wonder, what is our world coming to? Before you know it, McDonald's and Dunkin' Donuts are going to start selling bagels!

My good friend and colleague, Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg of Baltimore observed in a recent sermon that "this has been the summer of changing identities. It was the summer when Bruce Jenner turned into a woman and it was discovered that Rachel Dolezal – the President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Spokane, Washington, was in fact, not black but white!" He also noted that at the annual LGBT Pride parade in New York, a group of protestors denounced what the marchers were celebrating as a sin against God. The protestors were from a group called The Jewish Political Action Committee, representing Chassidic Jews. The only problem is: the Chasidic Jews were neither Chassidic nor even Jews!

In order to avoid having Chassidic Jews being present at a gay rights parade, the Jewish Political Action Committee hired Mexicans to dress as Chassidim to protest at the parade! Imagine that – now you can even outsource your protests. If Donald Trump has his way and deports these guys the Chasidim might have trouble finding people to hire who will demonstrate on their behalf.

With non-Chasidic Chasidim and Hebrew National pushing gourmet trafe, it seems that these days identity is blurred, complex and more complicated than ever before.

David Brooks writes in his new book, "The Road to Character" about Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's seminal 1965 book, "The Lonely Man of Faith." Soloveitchik explains that there are two accounts of creation in the book of Genesis and that the reason man is created twice is because there are two opposite sides of human nature. He called them Adam I and Adam II.

Adam I is the career-oriented, ambitious side of our nature who wants to build, create, and produce things, to attain status and win victories. Adam II embodies moral qualities. He aspires to have a serene inner character, and has a deep sense of right and wrong. He is concerned, as he puts it, not just "to do good, but to be good." The contrasting aspects of our personality are reflected in what Brooks identifies as the "resume virtues" which are the primary concern of Adam I, as opposed to the "eulogy virtues", which are the focus of Adam II.

He writes, "The resume virtues are the ones you list on your resume, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being – whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kinds of relationships you have formed." In other words, the traits those things that constitute what is known as, character.

I would suggest a different way to distinguish between the two, a different way to characterize the two dimensions, because trust me, I have heard and I have given plenty of eulogies at funerals that speak about resume virtues. I would not speak in terms of resume and eulogy virtues, but instead I would call what Brooks terms "eulogy" virtues "sermon" virtues. In other words, what are the attributes that rabbis talk about in their sermons. What are the virtues, especially on the High Holidays rabbis encourage us to emulate.

Soloveitchik says we live in the contradiction between the two Adams – the resume one and the eulogy, or, as I call it, the sermon one. One entails cultivating our strengths and the other encourages us to confront our foibles and weaknesses. One is about ambition while the other is about contentment and

satisfaction. The difference between the two is Adam I wants to conquer the world, while the other element wants to obey a calling to serve the world.

The truth is we need both. Using related, but slightly different terminology, classic Jewish sources speak of the *yetzer hara*, the inclination to sin and *yetzer hatov*, the inclination to do good. A story in the Midrash imagines what the world would be like without *yetzer hara*, the inclination to do evil, and if the world only consisted of *yetzer hatov*, the inclination to do good. Suddenly after just a few days without the *yetzer hara* the world was devoid of anyone having the urge to compete. Rather than being idyllic, people ceased to build, create or produce anything, including life itself. Eventually the world begged God to bring back and re-instill the *yetzer hara* in people, for without it, life was sterile.

The moral of the story the rabbis wanted us to learn is that we all struggle with our competing inclinations. The answer is not to do a lobotomy and eliminate or extricate the *yetzer hara*, but to learn how to control and channel it. That is why "Pirke Avot" says, "*Eizehu gibbor? Who is strong? Hakovesh et yetzro*, the one who can overcome his yetzer", his inclination to do the wrong thing. One who can resist immediate gratification is considered strong.

Eizehu gibbor can also be translated, "who is a hero?"

I occasionally ask kids when I meet with them before their bar or bat mitzvah who are their heroes? Who do they admire? I ask it as a means of trying to get to better know and understand them on a deeper level, to find out what makes them tick, what interests they have, and what motivates or inspires them. It is remarkable but I get a consistent answer. The answer I almost always get is either nothing, or "I don't know."

To evoke a response I may follow up and ask, if they have any role models, or if they had to read a biography about someone and write a report, who would they want to read and write about? No matter how I phrase the question, invariably, I get the same answer. I keep hoping that maybe they will cite someone they wish to emulate who is endowed with attributes of Adam II. Instead I usually just get blank stares. I wonder what this says about young people today and their lack of depth or perspective.

In fairness, it might not all be their fault that they don't have any heroes. Society confuses being a celebrity or being famous with being a hero. We mistake fame for influence. We live in a world in which social media encourages and promotes superficiality and self-aggrandizement. We have become unabashed self-promoters. Selfies are immediately posted on Instagram and Facebook to elicit likes.

In a poignant description David Brooks describes the subdued tone of a radio show after the Allied victory in World War II and the defeat of Nazi Germany with something he saw in an NFL game. After a defensive lineman did his job and kept an offensive gain to two yards he did a self-puffing victory dance for the cameras. Brooks writes, "It occurred to me that I had just watched more self-celebration after a two-yard gain than I had heard after the United States won World War II."

Bill Maher commented on this trend in our society when he said that L.A. is so celebrity-conscious, there's a restaurant that only serves Jack Nicholson -- and when he shows up, they tell him there'll be a ten-minute wait.

Speaking of self-promotion, one particular candidate for president seems to excel at that. One reason I am so concerned about the provocative comments and the response Donald Trump is getting is that so

much of his rhetoric and hurtful bravado is about putting down others. He seems to believe that putting down others elevates himself, and the disturbing thing is that so far it appears to be working.

His assessment of Carly Fiorina? “Terrible CEO.” About Dr. Ben Carson he says – “Not such a great neurosurgeon.” Jeb Bush? “Low energy.” John McCain? “Not really a war hero.” Never mind that he did something Donald Trump never did – enlist and serve in the military, that he served our country with distinction, refused to be released from captivity while his fellow prisoners were still being held in a North Viet Nameese prison cell, and most significant of all, that he has spoken at B’nai Tzedek as the recipient of the Ifshin Award. You name the person, Rosie O’Donnell, Kelley Megan, whoever has crossed or disagreed with him, and he will put the person down. And now that I have criticized him, I guess I am fair game. So if you were to ask him about me, he might say, “Weinblatt? Not as good a rabbi as he thinks he is.”

His approach seems so contrary to what Judaism teaches us about humility and modesty, as well as the imperative to see the good in others. We are implored not to embarrass or shame others, but to look for the best in others for we are all created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God.

Today is about cultivating Adam II, to improve our character and to cultivate our sermon (or eulogy) virtues. To do so, we must be honest with ourselves.

A story is told about Rabbi Zusya who was surrounded by his disciples on his death bed. His students saw that he was crying and asked him if he was afraid. He explained that he feared that when he died, he would not be asked why was he not Abraham or was he not like Moses. He feared he will be asked by his Creator why was he not Zusya?

This may be the meaning behind the Yiddish saying, “If your child has the talent to be a baker, don’t make him into a doctor.” Like Jean Valjean, we need to accept and come to terms with who we are. But then, Rosh Hashana beckons us to grapple with who we should try to be.

This can be painful, difficult and hard work, but as the High Holiday liturgy tells us, by praying, by giving tzedekah and by doing teshuva we are on the right path and can find our way. Whether it is the choice between Adam I and Adam II, the struggle between *yetzer hara* and *yetzer hatov*, our ambitions and drive and our sense of appreciation and gratitude, being faithful or being tempted to go on the Ashley Madison website, regardless of what we call it, we all have our temptations and personal struggles.

And that is why observing mitzvot, Shabbat and Sukkot and the *Aseret Ymei Teshuva*, the Ten Days of Repentance, and other sacred days is so crucial. When you do this, when you take off of work and set aside other activities you are making an important statement about having your priorities in the right order.

That you are here today, that you are taking off a second day of work and have set aside these days to be in synagogue, to pray, to reflect, to be with God and your people, to contemplate these matters and to be a part of the drama of the story of the Jewish people is praiseworthy and admirable. You are asserting that you are in control of your life, that you are determining your priorities, and you have them properly aligned. It means you are anchored in something transcendental and lasting, and that you seek to know who you are, where you come from, and where you are headed.

In an early section of the morning service we contemplatively reflect on our nature and say, “Not upon our merit do we rely, but upon Your limitless love. What are we? What is the value of our lives...We are your people, partners to Your covenant, descendants of your beloved Abraham.”

There are multiple versions in various cultures of a story about a grandfather who told his grandson, “A fight is going on inside of you, like the fight between two wolves. One wolf is consumed by anger and greed. He spreads lies and deceit and causes pain. The other one is beautiful and good. He is friendly, joyful, loving, worthy, humble and kind. He spreads inspiration. These two are constantly battling each other.” The grandfather continued, “The same battle is going on inside of you, and inside of all human beings.” The story sparked the little boy’s interest, and so he asked his grandfather, “Which one is going to win?” The grandfather smiled and said, “which ever one you feed.”

Your presence affirms that you are willing to sacrifice in order to feed Adam II, of seeing to it that Adam II is nurtured and fed, because life is not only about our resumes and professional lives. It is about more than what we get, what we have or what we accomplish. It is the ultimate question of the *Aseret Ymei HaTeshuva*, who and what we are.

To that, like Abraham may you respond when asked, “Hineni, Here I am.”

And so, as we contemplate these eternal questions of our purpose and existence, our essence, nature and identity, may we draw strength from our heritage so we will like Jean Valjean have the confidence and resilience to courageously and honestly confront ourselves. May we use our gifts and talents wisely so that we endow our daily lives with sanctity and meaning. And may the new year be one which brings fulfillment and joy to our world, to each of you and your loved ones.

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