

Reconciling Soloveitchik's Two Adam's: Thoughts on Human Nature and Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur Morning 5776 / September 23, 2015

I remember as a kid my mother referring to "Adam's housecat." She would use this phrase in the context of being in a group of unfamiliar faces, for example, "He wouldn't know me from Adam's housecat." Now I knew about Adam, the first man; but I didn't realize he had a cat. It's nice to know that like me, Adam was apparently a cat lover...but what else do we know about Adam? Before we begin, I'd like you to close your eyes and consider this question. Make sure they're closed... Now, here's the question. When you were growing up, what do you think your parents wanted the most for you – to be happy... or good? Happy or good? Raise your hand if they wanted you to be happy... Now raise your hand if they wanted you to be good... Now those of you who are parents or have been parents, what would you say you want for YOUR children – for them to be happy... or good? If you say happy, raise your hand... And if you say good, raise your hand. Now as we learn a little bit about Adam, keep your answers in mind.

Why talk about Adam on Yom Kippur? Adam, as the Torah tells us, was the first man on earth. We know the basic story... God created Adam and then from his rib created Eve. They lived happily in the Garden of Eden with only one rule to follow: Do not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And we know that thanks to the clever serpent, Eve convinced Adam to succumb to the temptation of the fruit. They were kicked out of the garden and that was that. But wait...there's more – much more.

Did you know that in the Torah there are TWO creation stories, and thus, TWO stories of Adam? It's true! In the first story (Genesis chapter one, verse one through Genesis chapter two verse three) God created human beings in the Divine image AFTER making all the other animals and plants. "Male and female created He them." In the second account, God made one man ("Adam"), shaping him from the earth ("Adamah") and breathing into him the breath of life.

Then God created all of the animals in order to find a helpmate for Adam. God brought all of the animals to Adam to name, but none of them appealed to him. So God made a woman from one of Adam's ribs to become his helpmate.

To explain why there are two Adam's in the Torah, I would like us to explore the thoughts of Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik. Soloveitchik was a major American Orthodox rabbi, Talmudist and modern Jewish philosopher who was a scion of the Lithuanian Jewish Soloveitchik rabbinic dynasty. Born in Belarus, he studied in Warsaw and Berlin, eventually earning his PhD in philosophy before coming to Boston in 1932. He founded one of Boston's first Hebrew day schools before going to New York to succeed his father as the head of Yeshiva University's rabbinical school in 1941. In 1965, Soloveitchik published an essay entitled "The Lonely Man of Faith."

In "The Lonely Man of Faith" Soloveitchik reads the two creation accounts in Genesis as a study in the contrast of human behavior. The two Adam's are actually representative of two types of human beings, two human ideals. Adam I, as portrayed in the first creation story, is called "*Adam Natura*," or Natural Man, who lives out his days and nights as the chief creation of the animal world, a man in search of dignity and majesty. This Adam is gifted with the ability "to fill the earth and master it" as Genesis tells us. This Adam is our first scientist whose task is to name and classify the animals in the Garden and therefore, he sees himself as somewhat detached from the rest of creation. Adam I having been created *b'tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God, wants to understand the workings of the world so he can create and replicate them himself. This Adam is very practical, very utilitarian, and sees the Earth as at his disposal to fulfill his needs, desiring to be in control of his environment.

Adam II as portrayed in the second creation story is a man in search of redemption. This Adam, "*Adam Humanus*" is submissive and humble and hungers for a relationship with God and his fellow man.

He seeks to overcome feelings of inadequacy, to fulfill his intellectual and emotional needs, and to expand his horizons beyond the confines of the Garden. He is fascinated by the world around him and wants to experience all the wonders the world has to offer as he cares for God's garden. Unlike Adam I who seeks to subdue creation, Adam II sees himself as a part of it.

So how can we relate to these Adam's? Do you see yourself as one or the other or does your life balance the two? David Brooks, a columnist for the *New York Times*, has an interesting way of exploring Soloveitchik's idea and addresses it in a [TED](#) (Technology, Entertainment, and Design) talk entitled "Should you live for your resume or your eulogy?" To Brooks, Adam I and Adam II are representative of the virtues of our lives – resume virtues and eulogy virtues.

The resume virtues are those traits embodied by Adam I – all of the accomplishments and skills you bring to your work life. This is the Adam who seeks to subdue his environment. He wants to use his Divinely implanted skill to build, create, name, start a company, make his name known. He is worldly and ambitious. Like Jack in *Titanic*, he proclaims, "I'm the King of the World!"

The eulogy virtues are demonstrated by Adam II. "Adam II is the humble side of our nature," Brooks says. "Adam II opts not only do good but to be good. To live in a way internally that honors God, creation and our possibility."

Where Adam I wants to conquer the world, Adam II wants to obey the world and be called to service. Adam I desires accomplishment. Adam II desires inner strength and conviction. Adam I wants to figure out how the world works. Adam II wonders why we are here. Adam I lives for success, Adam II lives for love, redemption, and return – *t'shuvah*. Adam I says "I work, therefore, I am, and I am valuable." Adam II says, "God is, therefore, I am, and I am valuable. Adam I thrives in times of victory and success, and

Adam II thrives in times of defeat and failure. The key is to find a balance between the two.

Let's think about our lives today as Americans. What do we see glorified in our culture? Beauty... wealth... huge homes... big jobs... titles... power...happiness. Facebook (and I'm just as guilty as anyone) can become a brag rag. I did this, I was chosen to lead that, I had this idea, I sang this solo, I made this recording, buy my new book, check out my CD, I'm now the president of blah blah organization. How many "likes" do I have? We have become a society that values the resume virtues and extols Adam I, and all but neglects Adam II and the virtues we want in our eulogies. Our obsession with being happy has led to our quest for material gain, recognition, and professional success. We must have more, get more, and do more. I will be honest with you. One of the reasons I left my large pulpit in Chicago was that I had stomped on my Adam II self. Both Brian and I had. When it seemed I could never do enough, I was bound to prove them wrong, and I worked 13 hours a day. My kids came home to an empty house because I wouldn't say no to a tutoring appointment or a scheduled meeting. And for years I put those 100 b'nai mitzvah children ahead of my own. Now my children are grown and gone, and I will never get those years back. At my funeral, I fear that's what my children will remember – the times I wasn't home, the times we grabbed fast food, and the times I missed their games and swim meets. And I know I am not alone. I had a family once where the husband lived in Alaska for his work and the family was in Chicago. "We just can't pass up the opportunity," they said. What about all the hours you are missing with your children? Doesn't that count for something? We are living in a society that loves instant gratification, and all the things that lead us away from our best selves (to use High Holy Day language) are fast – like lust, envy, and vanity. The qualities of our Adam II selves – honesty, humility, and gaining courage take much more time, so they are more difficult nowadays.

Brooks says that to create a better balance between our Adam I and Adam II qualities and our resume and eulogy virtues, we should work on becoming deeper persons – to lead a life of depth. In this way we can balance our external desire for success and happiness and our internal desire for goodness. Here’s how in five steps:

Step 1. First of all, we must love in a way that is transformational and unconditional. Be it love of a cause, love of a person, or love of God, to love is to help us remember that we don’t have ultimate control of ourselves and helps us find that the center of ourselves is when we are outside of ourselves.

Step 2 is suffering. Research shows that when we look back in our lives, we often note those times in our lives that were difficult, not necessarily the happy times, for it was the times of suffering that helped us to grow and develop into the people that we are today. Suffering and pain help us to grow and teach us empathy for others.

Step 3 according to Brooks is internal struggle. Those who have depth in their lives, though they may have inner strength, also recognize that they have weaknesses as well. Those who are constantly battling with their weaknesses are more inclined to build their character.

Step 4 is obedience. This is an obedience that causes us to take action. It doesn’t come from dwelling inside ourselves and acting upon an inner desire or a secret passion. It comes from an external stimulus or event that causes us to want to act, such as seeing injustice in the world.

And Step 5 is acceptance, which Brooks describes as a sort of “unmerited, unearned admittance to the ... human transcendent community.” Adam II just accepts the fact that he is accepted. His existence is organic and part of a whole. It doesn’t depend upon anything else.

So this approach is different from most self-help approaches today. Where most books advocate that we go into ourselves totally, Brooks advocates that we have to balance both the external and the internal, our Adam I and our Adam II.

And so it is in our lives here at B'nai Chaim. We need both Adam's in our community for our success AND for our spiritual development. I ask you on this Yom Kippur to consider our synagogue and our congregation. How can we use both Adam's to help our congregation to flourish, not only financially and physically, but to also embody Jewish traditions of mitzvot and tz'dakah? Of tikkun olam, human dignity, inclusion, and welcome to all? Our Adam I's must be willing to integrate more deeply into our covenantal faith community to experience humility and spirituality, and our Adam II's must be willing to enter the community of creativity and success and join together to solve problems and handle the day-to-day issues that may arise within our temple.

Now let's return to the very beginning when I asked you if your parents wanted you to be happy or good. What do you think of your answer now? Which is most important to you? Can you embrace both sides of your nature? And now that you know a little more about Adam, when you see his housecat, will you introduce me?

K'tivah v'chatimah tovah! May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year!