

Rabbi Jeremy Master

Yom Kippur morning 5782-September 16, 2021

The Upswing-Bringing America Together Again

Over the past year and a half our country, in addition to the impact of the pandemic, has experienced numerous traumatic events that have shaken our nation to its core. These events did not just pop up spontaneously, but are the result of long term trends. Over the last fifty years the economic gap between rich and poor has grown tremendously. In social life we are lonelier and less connected than ever. Our culture and politics have become more polarized and fragmented. People across the spectrum are angry and frustrated over the state of our nation, facts that we are all aware of. Over the last several years, Pew surveys have shown that Americans are broadly pessimistic about the future of our country. As many of us know, this wasn't always the case. In the 1950s and 1960s these same surveys showed broad optimism for the future of our country. Seeing this long term change in our sense of optimism for the future of our society is disturbing. As we sit here on this Day of Atonement reflecting on our actions seeking personal growth, I believe it would benefit us to also reflect on the state of our society, to ask ourselves from a Jewish perspective how can we reestablish the optimism that served as a guiding light to our nation for so much of our history.

According to social scientists one of the main threads that connects the issues plaguing us right now is that over the past fifty years we have become a more individualistic, self-centered society. When we fought World War II and experienced the beginning of the Cold

War there was a great degree of solidarity in our nation. People came back from the war, got involved in their community and broadly supported shared efforts to improve the well-being of our nation and our fellow person as we joined in our commitment to shared American ideals. In the aftermath of this period of solidarity, a new philosophy of radical individualism has grown. While many people have benefited and found satisfaction from this less communal orientation, as we can see, this change in orientation from community focused to more self-centered has had numerous negative impacts leading to broad pessimism about the future.

The challenge of finding a balance between the needs of the self and the needs of the community is at the heart of one of the most famous quotations from the ancient Rabbis as the sage Hillel says, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself alone, then what am I? And, if not now, when?" The first question that Hillel asks tells us that the individual is made in the image of God and must fulfill their potential as a separate individual. Jewish tradition sees the individual as being made of two parts, the good inclination, the heavenly soul, and the evil inclination, the animal soul. In the Talmud we are told that the evil inclination is actually good and necessary: "Were it not for the impulse to evil, a man would not build a house, take a wife, have children, or engage in commerce. According to Ecclesiastes, all such activities come from a man's rivalry with his neighbor." The human drive for personal success is a major element that causes human society to grow and thrive. The reason this essential drive is called the evil inclination is when this drive grows out of control it is what causes us to commit sin. A spiritual goal of Judaism is to have our good inclination gain mastery over our ego so that our personal desire for success is guided to serve a higher purpose.

This spiritual goal of directing the ego to serve a higher purpose is what underlies Hillel's second question. While we are all individuals made in the image of God, we are also defined by the communities that we are part of. The covenant in the Torah makes demands upon the individual to sacrifice some of their desires in order to better serve the entire community. A few verses after his famous questions, Hillel goes on to say, "Don't separate yourself from the community." The community gives the individual so much that we need, a sense of belonging, connection to our fellow person, support when it is needed, and so much more. We should not follow just our selfish desires, but should engage in humility and sacrifice some of our own needs in order to recognize the needs of others.

Hillel's final question, the pithy "If not now, when?" is perhaps the most important of these three questions for it is telling us to stop procrastinating. The pathway to self-actualization, to achieving our highest potential, is right there for us in our tradition if we just follow the pathway that is set before us. We can't let pessimism lead to apathy and a lack of involvement. Hillel is telling us to get involved with a sense of urgency with regards to our responsibility towards ourselves and our larger world.

The moral challenge then of Hillel's questions is finding the balance between self-interest and self-sacrifice. Judaism wants us to go out as individuals into the world and find success for ourselves, but to never forget that the individual is also part of a larger community and has responsibilities to that community and we should never stop feeling the urgency to improve ourselves and the world we live in.

The current malaise in our society is not the first time we have faced such challenges where self-interest overcame self-sacrifice and when we have faced these challenges we have banded together to overcome them. When we faced a sneak attack in 1941, we didn't think about how the war would affect our own needs, we joined together as a society to fight. When the Civil Rights era started, Americans joined together because they believed in a dream where everybody could truly be considered equal parts of this society. The past has shown us that whatever challenges we are facing, we can overcome them. Now is the time to stop procrastinating and to get involved, now is the time to heed the words of our tradition and to work to improve ourselves and our community.