

NOTES FROM THE CANTOR

If you're like me, you probably spend much of your day interacting with others: at home with your family, at work, at the gym, running errands. Some of these interactions, by their very nature, are more intimate than others.

We're more likely to devote time and attention to those individuals who are closest to us, namely family and friends. But even then, in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives, some of those moments of connection are often rushed and overlooked.

So what about all those other perfunctory daily encounters? How do we interact with the gas station attendant? The cashier at the grocery store? A passing stranger walking down the street? If we're often only half-listening to those closest to us, we may hardly even register the existence of these myriad other passing souls in our lives.

The 19th century Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, frames two different kinds of relationships; the I-It relationship and the I-Thou relationship. I-It relationships are merely transactional – what can I get from this person? What can they do for me? These are functional interactions, superficial and devoid of meaning. I do not look the cashier in the eye and I mutter an empty thank you as I rush to load my groceries into the car. The cashier is an object serving a purpose to me. I do not experience her humanity at all.

An I-Thou relationship, on the other hand, requires two people to turn to one another and truly see each other. We are both present, engaged in a dialogue and sharing mutual respect and concern. Once a week, I take my daughter out for a snack after school, just the two of us. We sit and share details from our day, we laugh, and we talk, and we truly see one another. It's precious I-Thou time for us both and it's become a sacred weekly tradition. It's easy to do this on a special outing with my daughter, but what about a passing interaction with a total stranger? Can that be an I-Thou experience too?

When my husband, Ben, and I were first dating, we were both getting started in New York City. I was overwhelmed by how aggressive city-folk can be and I was struggling to find my way in this rough and abrasive new place. Then I started noticing how Ben walked through the streets of New York. He always held the door for an elderly person leaving a building, always offered his seat to someone on the subway, always thanked a police officer standing guard, always asked the cab driver how his day was going so far. And, more often than not, these people were kind and appreciative in return. Even when surrounded by angry New Yorkers, Ben was able to transform mundane I-It moments into I-Thou moments. And, as Buber writes, in these I-Thou moments, we find the Divine. God dwells in sacred interactions - where people are seen and see in return. When we listen and are heard in return. When we offer one another, no matter who they are, basic kindness and respect.

This becomes difficult when our attempts at I-Thou efforts are met with rudeness or indifference, but in those moments, we might still try to see the other's humanity. What are they struggling with that's making them so angry? What frustration confounded their day? Maybe these reminders can help us, in turn, to remain patient and continue to honor and respect the other, no matter what. In this way, may we strive to experience the Divine as we seek out the humanity of every individual.

B'Shira, in song,
Cantor Micah Morgovsky