

On the Other Hand

Sermon for Erev Rosh HaShanah 5781

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

Our tradition is full of great thinkers. Albert Einstein. Elie Wiesel. Maimonides. But there is one whose wisdom and insight so beautifully captures our worldview: Our great philosopher, Tevye the Dairyman. Whenever he was presented with a moral question, he had a simple and straightforward method of looking at the problem. He would think to himself, “on the one hand, but on the other hand...but on the other hand...but on the other hand!” Maybe it was living in a home with Golde and his five daughters that taught him to try to balance a variety of thoughts and opinions; they were not shy about sharing theirs with him. But his commitment to the notion that the answers to our pressing moral questions lay somewhere between one hand and another is reflective of his deep understanding of the wisdom of our tradition.

Our way of seeing the world is not with simple, elemental truths that are easily pursued. Our way of seeing the world is with a constellation of values and morals, values and morals that often intersect or disburse, creating tension or conflict. We ask God to act with both justice and mercy, as during these Days of Awe we pray that God evaluates our deeds of the past year. We strive for *emet v'emunah*, truth and faith, and the insight to know the difference. When we are faced with a difficult decision, wondering about the right path to take, our tradition guides us to think like Tevye, “on the one hand...but on the other.”

This is especially true when we think about our obligations to ourselves and to others. Throughout our tradition, we are told to hold those two sets of obligations in relation, and perhaps in tension with one another. When we have to ask ourselves, should I do what's right for me, or should I do what's right for others, when we have looked at the one hand, and then the other, and then the other, and then the other, ultimately what we ought to do is try to find the balance, where we can uphold our obligations both to ourselves and to others in a meaningful and productive way.

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In his famous teaching in *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Hillel challenged us to seek out that balance: *Im*

Ain Ani Li, Mi Li. U'kshah ani l'atzmi, mah ani?; If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? On the one hand, I am the only one who unabashedly cares for my own well-being; no one else cares for me as much as I do, and I so must, for my own sake, put myself at the front of my concern. On the other hand, I cannot ignore the needs of those around me. We live in community, we have a shared experience and shared fate, and so I cannot divorce myself for the wellbeing of those who I see every day, those with whom our lives intertwine. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” the Torah teaches.” But on the other hand, as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin reminds us, “‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ implicitly commands us to love ourselves as well.”¹

Sometimes it's easy. A reliable fire department, ready at a moment's notice, keeps me and you all safe and protected. What I need is what you need, it's what we need together. But Rabbi Hillel would not have reminded us of our dual and dueling obligations if that were always the case. Often, my own desires might conflict with your needs, or your desires with mine. The challenge then of Rabbi Hillel's teaching is knowing how I should balance my concern for you and my concern for me. This has become readily apparent as we have navigated the coronavirus pandemic of the last several months, and sought to balance our individuals wants and needs with those around us. It has not been easy.

Right now we are all sitting in our homes, watching Erev Rosh HaShanah services live over the internet. We have forgone our centuries-old practice of gathering in synagogue to welcome the new year together. You may have your favorite seat in the sanctuary, but tonight you are sitting in

¹ <https://www.voices-visions.org/content/poster/collection-poster-rabbi-hillel-pirke-avot-114-daniel-bennett-schwartz>

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your favorite spot on the couch. Of course we are doing this to keep everyone safe, knowing that gathering in large numbers in indoor spaces can easily spread the virus. But this is an extreme example, the large gatherings that the High Holy Days represent. For these past months, our families, our neighborhoods, our businesses and schools, and yes our synagogue have had to decide what we will do and what we won't. In an attempt to flatten the curve and then keep the virus at bay our answer time and time again has been on the side of caution, of restriction, of closure. Safer at home has been our mantra, and just ask for patience until we can emerge into safety and good health. We have retreated to ourselves, shuttering the doors of our homes and communal gathering spaces to protect ourselves from those around us. We have done so at the expense of so much: life changing events like graduations and weddings, little pleasures like a haircut, dinner with friends or live performances, the ability to comfort and console each other in times of pain and loss. We did it so that as few people would be infected as possible.

But on the other hand, I have often asked myself, is this the best way? I am lucky to live with my wife and three girls, and one of the unexpected joys of this time has been that we have been able to spend so much time together, more than we usually are able to due in large part to my commitments to the congregation. So for me, while I certainly miss many aspects of our pre-COVID life, there is saving grace in this new reality. It pains me when I think of those members of our community who live alone, who have been effectively cut off from any and all human contact for months on end. Many of you have shared with the challenges of loneliness and solitude during these months. We are not meant to live like this, and we know that the toll this pandemic has taken on our mental wellbeing is mounting. Depression is spiking, as are the stresses of family life. If

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getting a haircut is someone's only physical contact with another human being in months and months, we know that there is a lot of healing that needs to happen.

It has made me wonder whether my relative comfort through this pandemic has clouded my judgment, blinding me to the needs of others. Just because I am healthy and relatively happy with what we have done, I have had to constantly remind myself that there are others for whom these months have been interminable, and challenge myself to put myself in their shoes as we consider what we ought to do as a community as this pandemic continues. That is part of what Rabbi Hillel wanted us to go. He wants us to advocate for ourselves and our concerns, and at the same time have an listening ear and an open mind to the wants and needs of those around us. To be for myself, but not only for myself; to be looking out for myself when I am working for others, and to be looking out for others when I am working for myself.

I recently read the story of Jacqueline Novogratz, a non-profit venture capitalist; she raises money to invest in and partner with developing regions around the world. She spends her days looking for opportunities where her interests and the interests of her partners dovetail with larger, global concerns, and then pursuing those opportunities. But she tells a fascinating story from her undergraduate days at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Like a lot of college towns, there is some tension between the long-term residents of Charlottesville and the revolving student population. There are cultural differences and socio-economic differences; the bubble of UVA often makes the locals almost invisible to the student body, even those who work on campus.

While she was an undergrad, a campus fraternity has just held a “dress like a local,” party, a denigration of those lifelong Charlottesville residents who worked so hard to keep the campus functioning. Jacqueline, who had seen a flyer that solicited students to donate Christmas dinners

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and toys, had an idea for a party of her own. The cost of admission: holiday foods and gifts that she and her roommate would bring to a local family to enhance their celebration. A way to give back to Charlottesville, and make up for their fellow students' offensive stereotype. Dozens of friends came with donations in hand, and in the morning, still recovering from the night before, the two roommates packed up their "veritable...feast, complete with a turkey and all the trimmings, and a big...bag full of toys"² to drive the 30 miles across down to deliver them.

As I read the story I thought of our beloved Giving Tree. Each winter, activating the deep relationships our volunteer leaders have with organizations around greater Boca Raton, we collect the names, ages, and holiday wish lists for hundreds of children in our community, placing them like leaves on a tree in our two campus buildings. Members of our synagogue and friends of the Temple take those leaves, buy the items on the list, and then our army of volunteers sort, wrap, and deliver the gifts. It makes us feel great that we can do something nice for our neighbors during the holiday season, and we know that the recipients get exactly what they want.

That's not what happens in Jacqueline's story. As they were approaching the house that they could barely find, with a meal and gifts for people they had never spoken to, they suddenly felt foolish, even ashamed. They had wanted to respond to the guilt they felt about their fellow students' behavior, which is commendable. They wanted to do a nice thing for someone during the holidays, a charitable act. But Jacqueline realized that while her intentions were noble, she failed to strike the balance between her desires and the needs of the family she had hoped to help. They didn't ask what the family needed, or wanted, that holiday season. They didn't ask about who lived

² Novogratz, Jacqueline. *Manifesto for a Moral Revolution*, pp. 41.

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in the household, the ages of the children and or their interests. In their zeal to assuage their guilt about their fellow students' attitudes toward their neighbors, they missed an opportunity. She met her needs to feel better, but could have done so much more to meet the needs of that family, if she had tried. For that, she felt ashamed. From that, she learned to do philanthropy in a much more holistic manner.

That winter in Charlottesville she learned to “view other people’s problems as if they were your own, and begin to discern how to tackle those problems.”³ She describes that viewpoint as “moral imagination,” “challenging ourselves to understand and transcend the realities of current circumstances and envision a better future for ourselves and others.”⁴ For ourselves and others. She makes it sound so easy. I wish that everything that I needed and wanted was exactly what everybody else needed and wanted...we could just do that, I would always get my way, and we'd all be happy!

Balancing our needs and the needs of those around us is part of being in a community of any size. From a household to a synagogue, a city to a nation, each community is both a collection of individuals and a single, enmeshed unit. We have known this since God called us together as a nation, putting before us the Torah which reminds us over and over again reminds us that we have responsibilities to ourselves and to others. We talk about our mitzvot as being for our own benefit or for the benefit of others. At times we focus more on ourselves, and at times we focus more on others. It isn't always easy, but finding that balance between the self and the community is part of

³ Novogratz, 43.

⁴ Ibid.

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our moral responsibility. We are our best self, we are our best communal partner, when we challenge ourselves to find that balance.

As we enter into the new year, we take time to rebalance. Our *Chesbon Nefesh*, the spiritual and ethical self-evaluation that this season impels us to do, is an activation of that moral imagination, where we “challenging ourselves to...envision a better future for ourselves and others,”⁵ a Shana Tova, a year of goodness, so we can pursue it. We turn our attention from focusing on the day to day decisions at hand. We use this time to revisit the decisions we have made in the past year. We think about the year ahead and what challenges and opportunities it might bring us. We reorient our moral compasses, calibrating our values and putting ourselves back into the tension between self and other that will capacitate our moral imagination. We envision the year that we would like to see, when our needs, and the needs of those around us are met. We envision knowing when to be for ourselves and when to act for others. We envision a year when we are able to be for ourselves and for others, and bring joy and goodness to the world.

May we have the strength, may we have the courage, may we have the moral imagination to make this new year 5781 a year of peace, a year of goodness, a year of healing. To that end, we continue now with prayers for healing. Please rise.

⁵ Novogratz, 43