

Those of us who are blessed with grandchildren always have a story at hand to show just how cute or clever our grandson or granddaughter is. One of my favorite stories about my granddaughter Eva goes back five and a half years to when she was two years old. It was the night of our family Passover seder, and I had some dollar coins in my shirt pocket to give out as a prize for finding the afikoman. I was sitting on the family room couch with Eva, and she reached into my pocket, discovered the coins, and said, “My money!” I laughed, and truth be told, still find the incident amusing. I realized some time afterwards that at that stage in the development of her linguistic skills, “my” was not so much an assertion of ownership as her way of saying “I want.” Thus, “my milk”, something she often said, meant, “I want milk” (and why don’t you go the refrigerator and get it for me).

For children, what “I” want and what is “mine” take center stage. As we advance to a more mature level of moral and ethical development, our focus on the self and its needs and desires is tempered and modified by empathy, deferral of gratification, and the recognition that social stability and order depend on reciprocity and on treating others as we would wish to be treated. Regrettably, however, there are adults who have not advanced beyond the perspective of early childhood. And all of us are guilty at times of regressing to that focus on “me, myself, and I” to the exclusion of all else.

Defining the legitimate boundaries of concern for the self is a tricky and subtle endeavor. We are all born with the instinct for self-preservation. Our needs, both physical and emotional, are valid, and denying or repressing them is unhealthy. I am a firm believer in that interpretation of Leviticus’ injunction - to love your neighbor as yourself -that holds that unless we are able to love ourselves, we will be incapable of loving our neighbor. Absent a healthy measure of self-respect and self-assertion, we lay ourselves open to becoming a doormat, to being taken unfair advantage of to further others’ ends and agendas. If you don’t believe that you yourself are worthy of being treated with respect and consideration, it is unlikely that you will accord such treatment to others.

Rabbinic psychology spoke of the two inclinations that reside within the human psyche – the *yetzer hatov* or good inclination and the *yetzer ha-ra* or evil inclination. Modern interpreters have thought of the latter not so much as evil but rather as passion or

ambition and have regarded it as dangerous and threatening only when it is not channeled into acceptable outlets. The Rabbis recognized that the *yetzer ha-ra* could not be destroyed without undermining the whole basis for human life and enterprise. They told a story about a group of their colleagues who captured the evil inclination (which they imagined in personified form), tied him up, and held him captive, so that he could not tempt vulnerable humanity. Ultimately, however, they had to release their prisoner, because during the entire time of his captivity no child was conceived, no business was launched, no commerce took place. A Rabbinic midrash explains that in the *V'ahavta*, the word for loving God **with all your heart** is *l'avcha* rather than the more concise and equally correct *libcha* and that the two *vets* were intended to represent the good and the evil inclination. We are commanded to serve God with both of these drives; even the evil inclination, when properly channeled, can be a vehicle for serving God and our fellow persons. In sum, there is a place, indeed a need in this world and in the context of human society for the self and its passions and its ambitions.

But there are limits of which the self needs to be mindful. We note that this is the season of repentance, when we acknowledge the wrongs we have done, express remorse for them, and resolve not to repeat the offending behaviors. What we sometimes overlook is that even the good we do is often tainted by ulterior motives, by the self's desire for recognition, status and power. In an imperfect world, we realize that our choices are often not between absolute good and bad but between lesser and greater evils. We recognize too that it is better that *tzedakah* and *ma'asim tovim*, good deeds and acts of charity, be done, even if the doer's intentions are self-serving, than for those who benefit from such actions to be left in need and neglected. On Yom Kippur, however, we acknowledge that in an ideal world a *mitzvah* should be done purely for the sake of the *mitzvah*, that *tzedakah* is not about the donor and his or her motives but rather about the fulfillment of human need and the sharing of blessings, for which those who give are but the agents.

You've doubtless heard the story of the two individuals who were conversing. One was dominating the conversation and going on at length about his past accomplishments, his concerns, his plans for the future. Finally after what seemed an endless monologue, he interjected, "well, enough about me. Let's talk about you. What

do you think about me?” To such a person, one wants to offer the comeback, “it’s not always about you.”

The self has its legitimate place, but it (by which I mean life, relationships, the world and the course of human affairs) is not always about me. The very point of doing a *mitzvah*, whether ritual or ethical, is not to enhance my self-gratification but to link me with something larger than myself. Spirituality means making a connection with something larger than me, something bigger than the self, because transcending the finite and mortal self is the path to a meaningful life.

In whatever manner we conceive of a Supreme Being or deity, God is not just about us. A God worthy of being worshiped has to be more than a projection of our own prejudices or an instrument for advancing our self-interest. The Kotzker rebbe once asked his disciples where God dwells and proceeded to answer his own question, “God lives wherever people let God in.” Sometimes, our pride, our arrogance, our excessive self-regard and self-concern prevent us from experiencing the genuine presence of the divine. When we are too full of ourselves, there is no room for God to enter. By serving a God Whom we identify with the creation and the ongoing sustenance and renewal of our vast universe, we are connecting to something larger than the self. In Biblical theology, what Abraham Heschel called God’s stake in human history involves the dignity and the well-being of all humankind. And for the religiously sensitive individual, the resources of the earth which enable us to supply our basic needs are not just about us. They come to us with a mandate to be wise stewards who take into consideration the preservation of what has been entrusted to us and the needs of future generations.

It is a commonplace to observe that Jewish prayer is phrased in the plural, that we are offering our praise, our thanks, and our supplications in behalf of the community. We recognize as well that in Jewish worship, praying with a *minyan*, which fulfills the minimum requirement for constituting a community, is the preferred option. Prayer is not just about us and our needs. The language of the *siddur* and *machzor* and the presence of fellow worshipers remind us that others have needs, anxieties and aspirations of which we must be cognizant. The community, whether at prayer, celebrating together, mourning together, or simply enjoying moments of fellowship enables us to transcend the self. We feel the pain of others and reach out to console them. We rejoice in their *simchas* and

enhance their joy by sharing in it. We accord them respect by showing an interest in the details of their lives, by letting them know that they matter to us. We contribute our talents and our efforts to something that existed before we came along and will continue to exist after our departure and, in so doing, add to the community's well-being and viability. All the more so do we achieve a measure of transcendence, when the community of which we are a part has a heritage that has endured for thousands of years. By participating in the community's ongoing mission and being part of the dynamic process of re-interpreting its heritage and applying its message to the needs of the present, we become part of something far larger than the self.

I had a history instructor in college, who, when asked, what would appear on the final exam, would reply, "don't worry too much about the details; just understand the big picture." Spirituality is the ability to see the big picture. Much of the time our focus is zoomed in on my wants and needs, be those physical or emotional. We need to extend the frame outwards so as to understand our place in the larger scheme of things and see ourselves as part of a community, part of the unfolding of creation, and part of a universe all of whose diverse components are interconnected and partake of an underlying unity. I refer to this capacity for transcending the self and envisioning the larger picture as "spiritual", because when I am thinking only of me, there is an immediacy to what I want and need. I feel it close up and personal, whereas going beyond the self requires mental and emotional discipline and an ability to intuit something not palpable to the senses.

May we grow during the coming year in our capacity for the spiritual. May we appreciate the joy and the meaning that community imparts to us. May we feel uplifted by knowing that we are part of the vastness of creation and that the wonder of who we are (our bodies and our spirits) is connected to and reflects the larger wonder of the universe. May our lives and our relationships be enhanced by the mature understanding that prayer, *mitzvah*, the good that we aspire to do, and our very concept of God are not just about us.

Perhaps the definitive word about the self and its boundaries and the necessity for each of us to reach out toward a larger context, was set down in two succinct phrases by Hillel almost 2000 years ago. If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I?

