

I would like to share a teaching of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, also known as the Baal Shem Tov. He told this parable on the High Holy Days every year before the sounding of the final shofar on Yom Kippur.¹

There was a very wise king who wanted very much to be close to his people. But even more than that, he wanted his people to *want* to be close to him. Like a parent who naturally is close to his or her children, we as parents want even more that our children will always want to be close to us: to share their lives with us, to keep the conversation going...and not a superficial one, a real conversation.

Well, this king more than anything wanted his subjects to want to be close to him. So, being a master of illusions, he made a castle-illusion with walls, towers, and gates and he scattered illusory royal treasures at each gate. My teacher Rabbi Lawrence Kushner called these false treasures “bags of money, trips to Florida, and having a beautiful body.”² Then he commanded that he be approached through these gates and passageways. The people came to the castle, but one by one they gave up on the search to find the king and instead settled on one of the illusory treasures. Finally the king’s loving son struggled hard to reach his father the king. Then he saw that there was no separation between them, that it had all been an illusion.

So that is what God wants from us. Simple. Just to be in an intimate relationship with God where nothing gets in between us. And for us, that relationship has a name. It is called a *brit*, or covenant.

According to the parable, God gave us a beautiful and alluring world, and God gave us Judaism as a sort-of map to navigate the time and space of this marvelous world. We mistake that God simply wants compliance on actions, following commandments. However, the goal of Judaism is not about being more observant but about living in relationship to God. Keeping kosher is not about the food. And Shabbat is nor about the candles, wine or challah, just like Thanksgiving is not about the turkey. Even today...what is the point of Yom Kippur...to sit in synagogue all day? To fast? If that is all we do, then there is not point to it. Really. Judaism and all religion must point to something else. Not about being more Jewish, but about being more human. And somehow that means to live in covenantal relationship to the Holy One of Blessing.

We know a bit about covenantal relationships. It is a relationship you don’t walk away from without a fight. Marriage is the prime example.

There is a reason why when two people are getting married we call it “engagement” for being married means being engaged in one another’s lives quite intimately. Two people share a vision of their future together, grow together, grow old together. They share a home and bank accounts. They wonder if they are making the right career and financial

¹ Ya’acov Yoseph of Polonnoye: *Ben Porat Yosef* 55a Quoted from Arthur Green, “Hasidim: Discovery and Retreat” in *The Other Side of God: A Polarity in World Religions*, ed. Peter Berger. NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981.

² *Honey from the Rock*, p. 33-34.

decisions. They build a family together, and wonder if they are making the right family and educational decisions. They struggle, fight, make up, love. A marital covenantal relationship is like a diamond in the rough: it takes the friction of life to shine it. And when you are committed to being on that journey together, nothing is better. Nothing gives more meaning to your life.

Being in a covenantal relationship with God or Judaism [*they are really one and the same in my mind*] is being engaged in rich deep Jewish life. And of course, this is a lot more than simply following commandments or showing up for the High Holy Days. Just imagine how empty a marriage is when folks are only going through the motions. Judaism can be this way too when only going through the motions rather than being deeply engaged. And of course, being engaged means not just reaping great benefits and rewards, but also being committed and assuming the obligations of being in this relationship.

I never understood this until I learned the richness of life-in-relationship-to-God from a homeless man named John. Many of us have done acts of good will and may not have felt so spiritual. When I was a rabbinic student in New York City, I volunteered at a soup kitchen. We had many regular guests but I seemed to have befriended one in particular: a guy named John who was about my age but looked older and more worn. He would tell me each week that he used to be on drugs, about his struggles of trying to stay clean. John liked to talk about these things, it was affirming for him.

He would tell me about the church he would sometimes go to, and about finding God. The power of believing in God had given John strength. And here I was, someone there in the soup kitchen trying to help our guests who were hungry and often homeless. I was training to be a rabbi but I was the one feeling awkward when John would bring up God. He derived so much meaning in his relationship with God. And, me....well I knew a lot of stuff about Judaism and theology.

God was working in John's life in a way I did not understand. Week after week, he would invariably tell me the same things. Then he would ask if he could help out, right there in the soup kitchen. He would take around the trashcan picking up litter, or help break down the chairs and tables. He explained that he had learned in church that it was his duty to not just take but to give. There are no benefits without obligations. One day, really no different than any other, after talking and helping to clean up, when John was leaving, we shook hands; our eyes met; he said "God bless you.". And he left.

"God bless you." Such simple words. But I could only utter them after someone sneezed—and then by force of habit rather than conviction. John spoke deliberately and from the heart: "God bless you."

Why wasn't I blessing him?! "God bless you, John." But the thought never occurred to me. I was just doing some community service because it was a good thing to do. What did God have to do with this?

John taught me something. His relationship with God, the benefits and obligations, had given him a sustaining strength to heal himself. Through his example and his words, he

had pushed me to the edge, an edge from which there was no retreat – did I have a relationship with God where, through my holy obligations, I derived meaning and purpose? Or was I simply doing a good and decent thing out of my own good will, or, perhaps, to ease my conscience?

I know that it is our Jewish duty to do acts of loving-kindness—right? *It is good* to provide food for those who are hungry. But John taught me that what happening there in that soup kitchen was also about our relationship God. Not just providing a benefit to others. But by fulfilling a holy obligation, I too benefitted by deepening my relationship with God, with Judaism. Rabbi Yehoshua taught: The poor person standing at the door does more for the householder than the householder does for the poor person. [*Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* 34:8]

I could have told you a story about my transformation through Shabbat singing and dancing, through Torah study, through drawing my first pay check from the Jewish community and endorsing right back. There are countless examples when I have found meaning and purpose, beauty and value from being engaged in Jewish life, from living the covenant our people have with God. However, the message of this sermon will not be complete until you live the Divine covenant yourself through acts of loving kindness, learning, Shabbat and holiday celebration, prayer, welcoming guests, visiting the sick or house of mourning... thus deepening your relationship with God.

Today, Yom Kippur, is an invitation to enter into a holy covenant. Our tradition teaches that on Yom Kippur Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the *luchot ha-brit*, the tablets of the brit/Covenant ...the Torah is the ketubah, the wedding contract between God and the Jewish people. This is the day for making holy covenants.

When you join a synagogue, when you connected to Beth El, the only contract you make should *not* be for dues. We have failed as a community if the only expectation on you is financial. To be a part of the community is not to pay dues, but to be engaged in Jewish life; we are part of a sacred community when our “lives are enriched with meaning, purpose, connectedness, and relationship with God through prayer, study, acts of social justice, healing, and loving-kindness....”³

I am truly sorry if the only commitment we have asked of you is financial. My daughter’s AYSO soccer team expects more than that. Paying and dropping off your kid at soccer is not an option...every parent must volunteer to help support AYSO soccer. *And believe me, watching your kids play soccer will not be what holds your family together.* Today I make an appeal not for your dollars, but for you, for your time, for you to be engaged.

In a wonderful rereading of the Talmudic text: אַל תְּרַבֵּה שִׁחָה עִם הָאִשָּׁה “you shall not talk too much to women.” [Eruvin 53b, Pirke Avot 1.5] A mystic read it as “don’t talk when you should already be kissing.” It is time for us to take our relationship to another level.

³ Dr. Ron Wolfson, *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community*, p. 145.

Enough talk, I am asking for a Jewish commitment, to establish a covenant, a relationship with God, with Judaism, with other members of this congregation. When you arrive home at the end of Yom Kippur, you will have received an email from me with a covenant attached. It is safe to open...your computer will be fine. But if you take this covenant seriously, then you are the one who may be transformed.

The covenant is a sacred partnership between you and Temple Beth El. In it are our promises to provide meaningful community experiences and our expectations about what it means to be a covenantal partner. Much of the covenant is open ended. It lists many opportunities to be engaged in Jewish life. There is great flexibility to deepen your Jewish identity and nurture your soul through healing our world, connecting to Torah and tradition, honoring the holy times of the year, deepening your connection to Judaism and thus your relationship with God.

Please thoughtfully fill out the covenant, print a copy for yourself, and then email a copy back to me. We at Temple Beth El will do everything we can to fulfill our part, and we trust you will do the same. At the end of the year I will ask you to evaluate how the year went. How did we do? Did we fulfill our promises to you? And I'll ask you to evaluate yourself. How did you do? Did you honor the commitments you made? The journey may not be easy, but it will help us all find meaning, purpose, value, and beauty in our lives.

There is another parable of the ancient sages [*Pesikta Rabbati*]: A king's son was a distance of hundred days' journey from his father. His friends said to him, "Return to your father." He said to them, "I cannot, it is too far. Too difficult." His father sent word to him and said, "Go as far as you are able, and I shall come the rest of the way to you." Thus, the Holy One of Blessing said to the people Israel [Mal. 3:7]:

“שׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם” /Return to Me, and I will return unto you”

Enough talk already, it is time live our covenant, to be engaged in Jewish life. Get engaged to God...it is an intimate relationship that means so much.

Gamar Chatimah Tovah...may be signed in the book of life for a sweet and good year.