

Divine Love and Human Uniqueness

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During the High Holidays we stand before God both as part of the community and as individuals. In the famous *piyyut* sung on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Unetaneh Tokef, we picture God counting and assessing the members of the world:

וְכָל בְּאֵי עוֹלָם יַעֲבִירוּ לִפְנֵיךְ כְּבָנִי
מֶרֶן. כְּבִקְרַת רוּעָה עָדְרוּ. מַעֲבִיר
צֹאנֶנוּ תַּחַת שִׁבְטֶךָ. כֵּן תַּעֲבִיר
וְתִסְפֹּר וְתִמְנֶה וְתִפְקֹד נֶפֶשׁ כָּל חַי.
וְתִחְתֹּד קִצְבָּה לְכָל בְּרִיָּה. וְתִכְתֹּב
אֶת גְּזֵר דִּינָם:

All the people of the world will pass before You like a flock of sheep. Like a shepherd pasturing his flock, making sheep pass under his staff, so shall You cause to pass, count, calculate, and consider the soul of all the living; and You shall apportion the destinies of all Your creatures and inscribe their verdict.

The image of God the shepherd, at first glance, is ambiguous: Are we just part of a herd, one sheep

among many, or are we valued in all our individuality and uniqueness? Similar questions arise in the census of the Israelite tribes at the beginning of the book of Numbers. A variety of Jewish interpreters suggest that the careful counting of the people actually conveys one of the core truths of Jewish theology and ethics: Individuals matter.

One of Jewish theology's most fundamental claims is that God loves us. As R. Akiva, one of the greatest of the Talmudic Sages, teaches, "Beloved is the human being, for he was created in the image of God. Even more beloved is he for it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God, as it says, 'For in the image of God, God made the human being' (Genesis 9:6)" (Mishnah, Avot 3:14). God loves us, in other words, not because of anything we do, but simply by dint of who we are: Human beings created in God's image.

But Judaism goes much further. Jewish sources insist that God

cherishes human beings not as faceless representatives of a privileged species but as individuals: God loves us in all our singularity and uniqueness. A *mishnah* teaches: "Adam was created singly...to proclaim the greatness of the Blessed Holy One, for a human being stamps many coins with one die and they are all identical to one another, but the King of the kings, the Blessed Holy One, has stamped all of humanity with the die of the first man, and yet not one of them is like his fellow" (Sanhedrin 4:5). The Mishnah's message is staggering: Never before in the history of the cosmos has there ever been another human being just like you, and never again in the history of the cosmos will there ever be another human being just like you. And this stunning fact redounds to the glory of God.

The *mishnah* continues: "Therefore each and every person is obligated to say, 'For my sake was the world created.'" For a long time, I found this line deeply troubling. Isn't this a prescription for narcissism and self-congratulation? But over time

I realized that my anxiety said more about the culture we live in than about the text itself. We hear about uniqueness and all too often wonder what that entitles us to.

But when the Mishnah talks about human uniqueness and its implications for God's glory, it has in mind not (or at least not only) what we are entitled to but what we are responsible for. We are, all of us, called upon to serve. Yet crucially, we are not asked to serve in nameless anonymity but rather in the fullness of our own individuality. As human beings faced with a world so utterly broken in so many ways, we are called upon to ask not just what I can get, but also, and crucially, what I can give? How can I, with my unique gifts, talents, and passions—and my unique combination of weaknesses and limitations—best serve God? God's love is a call to service, and we answer not as human beings in general but as human beings in all of our particularity.

There is another critical dimension to all this. Our uniqueness implies our irreplaceability. When the Mishnah tells us that there has never been and will never be another person just like us, it also

implicitly points to the tragedy of our inevitable death: When we die, something infinitely precious and utterly irreplaceable simply disappears.¹

Uniformity need not— must not— efface real differences in opinion.

To put this starkly: Jewish theology affirms that when parents cry over the death of their child and wail that someone singularly precious has been lost, they are giving voice not only to their own personal pain but also to a fundamental truth about the universe. Uniqueness, and therefore irreplaceability, are constitutive of our humanity.

What is true about humanity in general is true of the Jewish people in particular as well. God's covenantal people are treasured not as nameless, faceless members of a collective, but as unique individuals living in an intimate relationship with God.

As we've already mentioned, the book of Numbers painstakingly details the census of the Israelites that Moses undertakes at God's behest. We hear about the arrangement of the camp, the names of the tribal chieftains, and the count of each and every tribe. Why all this careful accounting? A *midrash* offers a parable: "A man had a stock of fine pearls, which he used to count when unpacking them and taking them out (to the marketplace) and count them again before putting them away." So, similarly, the *midrash* imagines God saying to the Israelites, "You are my children...and therefore I count you often" (BeMidbar Rabbah 4:2).² Counting requires taking stock of each individual pearl: Each one is precious, taken out to be numbered and delighted in.

In a similar vein, R. Isaac Arama (1420-1494) asks why all the seemingly dull details of the census are necessary. Did God not know the

1 This is also made clear by another line from the *mishnah* we have been discussing: "Adam was created singly to teach you that if anyone destroys a single soul it is as if she destroyed an entire world." Although this statement likely referred originally to the fact that when someone dies, they and all their potential future offspring disappear (hence "an entire world"), many thinkers take it as an affirmation of the infinite value of any and every individual person.

2 Sadly, this *midrash* also has a troubling underside (which I have not cited here): It insists that God's paying loving attention to each individual Jew stands in stark contrast to God's attitude towards the other nations, to whom God is indifferent. As many Jewish texts amply and beautifully demonstrate, it should be possible to affirm God's love for Israel without succumbing to the kind of triumphalism that dismisses others as insignificant—or worse.

number of Israelites encamped in the desert in any case? Taking account of the Israelites one by one, R. Arama argues, serves to teach that each one has individual worth and is not just a member of the collective. “They were all equal in stature,” Arama writes, “and yet the stature of each one was different” (Akeidat Yitzhak, BeMidbar, #72).

Along the same lines, modern interpreter Nehama Leibowitz asks why Parashat Naso records in great detail the sacrifices that each tribal chieftain brought in turn—especially since they all brought precisely the same offering (Numbers 7:1-88). “Perhaps,” she suggests, “the Torah wished to emphasize the importance and uniqueness of the individual, repudiating the ideology that regards the human being as a cog in a vast machine and as an indistinguishable member of a mass.”³ Leibowitz formulates her comments negatively, as a statement of what Judaism rejects, but we can just as easily state it positively, as a reflection of what Judaism passionately affirms: Being part of a collective, no matter how important or sacred, should never be allowed—must never be allowed—to obliterate human difference and individuality. Another message may well be implicit here as well: Judaism traditionally demands relative uniformity of practice (recall, the chieftains all bring the very same

sacrifices), but such uniformity need not—must not—efface real differences in opinion, experience, and insight, which are to be treasured rather than overcome.

R. Isaiah Horowitz (known as the Shelah, 1565-1630) reports a Kabbalistic teaching that the 600,000 Israelites in the desert correspond to the 600,000 letters in the Torah. The souls of the Israelites originated in the letters of the Torah, he writes, and the spirituality of the Torah consists of those souls. All subsequent generations of Jews, he insists, are “branches” of those 600,000 original souls (Shelah, Parashat Korah, “Torah Or”). We need not be detained here by an extensive analysis of precisely what R. Horowitz means by his provocative words. Instead, we can derive the following simple but powerful implications: If every Jew is a letter in the Torah, then every Jew has a unique Torah to teach, insights into God’s teaching that are unavailable to anyone else. Without exposure to Torah, something in the very being of that Jewish person remains tragically dormant and unrealized. And conversely, without the world of Torah being exposed to that person, something crucial in the Torah remains buried, hidden from sight. R. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that “a Jew without the Torah is obsolete.”⁴ Maybe so,

but it is equally the case that the Torah without any particular Jew is incomplete.

The Hasidic Master R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740-1809) extends R. Horowitz’s insights into the realms of education and leadership. He teaches that “the Jewish people are the 600,000 letters of the Torah; thus Israel is the Torah, because every single Jew is a letter of the Torah.” When the book of Numbers says that Moses recorded (*pakad*) the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai (1:19), Levi Yitzhak creatively takes that to mean that Moses taught (*limed*) them Torah. Moses taught Israel Torah just as God had taught him (Kedushat Levi, BeMidbar, “*Ka’Asher Tzivah HaShem et Moshe*”). Levi Yitzhak’s words are less than clear, but I think what he means to suggest is that Moses’ teaching depends on his seeing the Israelites in all their uniqueness, understanding their own unique perspectives on and contributions to Torah. It takes a great teacher of Torah to understand how the individual pieces fit together to make a whole, how the disparate letters can be woven together to form a Torah.⁵ A real teacher works with her students’ individuality in two ways: She teaches in a way that the student can hear and learn, and she elicits from him his own unique insights and inspiration. Moses,

3 Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar-Numbers*, trans. Aryeh Newman (1993), p. 78.

4 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (1955), p. 167.

5 I am grateful to my friend and colleague R. Or Rose for a fruitful discussion of Levi Yitzhak’s words.

known universally in post-biblical Jewish sources as Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher, is here held up as the paradigmatic educator, one who sees, cherishes, and draws out the singular capacities and contributions of each student.

In serving God, we strive to cherish human uniqueness just as God does. This has dramatic implications for education, as we've seen, but also for what it means to live in community. R. Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1993) writes that "the individuals belonging to the community complement one another existentially. Each individual possesses something unique, rare, which is

unknown to others; each individual has a unique message to contribute, a special color to add to the communal spectrum." When a person joins a community, therefore, "he contributes something which no one else could have contributed. He enriches the community existentially; he is irreplaceable." Indeed, Soloveitchik adds, "to recognize a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person [in contrast] means to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him."⁶

As we reflect on our personal and communal goals for the coming year, I would suggest we must honor two facts simultaneously: As Jews

and as human beings, we share deep connection and kinship with each other, and, at the same time, we are irreducibly different from one another. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we may find solace and strength in standing together before God as a unified prayer community, but we can also stand tall as individuals with the knowledge that God loves and takes interest in each one of us. Moreover, the knowledge of our own self-worth in the eyes of God propels us to emulate God: Just as God treasures each Jew, and each human being, in all her singularity, so too must we. ♦

6 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Community," *Tradition* 17:2 (1978), pp. 7-24. Passages cited are on pp. 10, 16.