

**“The Fullness of Self”**  
Rabbi Rachael Jackson  
5778 Yom Kippur morning: September 30, 2017

A few nights ago, I was going a little out of my mind to be perfectly honest. My three year old son’s bedtime, and he *was. Not. In Bed.* He was awake, running around, trying to take off his pajamas and he just wanting to play.

I was annoyed. I was frustrated; it was 9:30pm—it was *waaay* past his bedtime, for me. I was, like any parent of young children knows or remembers, *I done for the evening.* I finally wrestled him into bed, and sat down on the couch to put my feet up, willing myself with frankly, sheer stubbornness to relax. With every fiber of my being, I just wished for Adrian to stay in his bed.

And so I thought I would bring out the “Shalom Coloring Book” (which if anyone hasn’t seen this, it is a great coloring book for adults) to help me calm down, to help me get over the residual negative emotion I felt toward my son’s behavior. But you know the first stray thought, these sort of ‘thought-drops’ that happen, that came into my head, as I reached for the blue gel pen? “*Wow. This is Adrian’s favorite color! He would love to see this.*”

It was Walt Whitman, the 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet, who said, “Do I contradict myself? Yes, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.”<sup>1</sup> This short line encompasses the human condition - Whitman has given us permission to be fully human. We can experience love and frustration simultaneously, be excited by an idea and be scared of it at the same time. As people, we are every emotion all at once. So when someone says, “how do you feel?” You think, umm, let me think—it is not that you don’t know, it is that you are trying to figure out the most prominent emotion at that time. We are our truest selves when we embody contradiction.

Think, for a moment, of the ancient Chinese symbol, *yin* and *yang*. There are two swirls combining to make a perfect whole. Each is a single color and yet has imbedded within it a perfect circle of its opposite color. The primary philosophical concept it attempts to convey is that all things exist as inseparable and contradictory opposites. Yet at the same time, they are the same circle. One needs the other. Our discomfort in life comes in fighting these incongruences.

Our Yom Kippur liturgy contains seeming contradictions in the concepts of community versus individuality, and seeking questions and finding answers. But it is this seemingly contradictory nature that helps us to become deeply introspective, and truly change ourselves for the better.

*Parshat Netzavim* in the Book of Deuteronomy, is Moses’ final address detailing how and why we live in community. It is his last, and perhaps most important speech, reminding each and every one of us that we are a member.

As we will read in just a few minutes, “You stand this day (*Atem nitzavim hayom*), all of you, before the Eternal your God — you tribal heads, you elders, and you officials, all the men of Israel, you children, you women, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to

---

<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass* [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s\\_z/whitman/song.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/whitman/song.htm)

water drawer - to enter into the covenant of the Eternal your God, which the Eternal your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions; to the end that you may be established this day as God's people and be your God, as God promised you and as swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Eternal our God and with those who are not with us here this day.”<sup>2</sup>

What an amazing statement! Torah says that it is not just the people who were there actually physically present at Sinai who are obligated to *mitzvot*, to do God's commandments, but everyone, all Jews from that moment on, in the future immemorial. Torah is everyone's, no matter their age nor gender nor station in life. This gives us communal responsibility, obligation to do *tikkun olam*, to heal the world, to make a difference on this earth, as dictated by the covenant in *Nitzavim*. We do this together.

At services, we pray communally, reading aloud the same words on the page at the same time. On Pesach (in just six months from now. I know, I can't stop thinking from one holy day to the next. But there is this amazing pattern of our holidays where the really big ones are about six months apart), we relive the exodus from Egypt as a large group, all taking part in the *seder*. When we say *Kaddish Yatom*, the Mourner's Prayer, after a loved one has died, we need ten people, a *minyan*, to stand collectively.

Yet, we are large, we contain multitudes. And so if the morning Torah reading on Yom Kippur focuses on the people, the afternoon reading focusses on the individual. For after all, what is a community except the amalgamation of individual members?

*Parshat Kedoshim*, the climactic chapter of the Book of Leviticus, teaches us that each of us can be holy. We'll read this afternoon: “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind... You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly.”<sup>3</sup> The burden of responsibility is on each of us as individuals, for each of us working alone “has the capacity to bring holiness into our lives and into the lives of those around us. Every act, great or small, can bring us closer to the sacred. As the Torah reading on Yom Kippur reminds us, each of us is capable of doing this. [And t]he way to a life of holiness is by sanctifying each moment of our lives.”<sup>4</sup>

This moment, this morning of Yom Kippur, we sit, we stand...we sit, we stand...we sit and stand a few more times, and pray for forgiveness. We recount our mis-marks in a room full of people doing the same. We sit together in community yet the prayers are almost unbearably personal. On Pesach, when relive the exodus, we do so communally at the *seder*. But, we must each eat our *charoset* and *maror* and dip our parsley into salt water alone, we must experience the emotion for ourselves. We recite *Kaddish Yatom* together, we stand collectively in a *kehila*, a community... but here at Agudas Israel, if are individually mourning, we stand up first, alone. It is a visible and physical act of acknowledging both solitude and community.

---

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 29:9-14

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:14-15

<sup>4</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/yom-kippur>

So if we ask the question, does Yom Kippur, does Judaism, focus on community or individuals; you can bet the complex answer is yes. Both. We have the obligation upon each and every one of us to be holy. We have the obligation to demonstrate *menschlikaet*, because each and every person deserves to be treated with love and respect. We have the obligation to stand up for our tradition. It is *our* tradition and it is the one we will pass to the next generation. And they will wrestle with it, and make it *their* own and when it comes time, they will pass it to the next generation—that is our communal responsibility.

For the liturgy of this holy day, and of Jewish practice as a whole, we recognize the fundamental truth that we are *all* large, we all contain multiplicities within us. For when we stand shoulder to shoulder, individually seeking yet surrounded by our community, we can find the courage to look deep within ourselves.

We seek *teshuvah*, most often translated as “return” or “repentance.” We examine what we have done over the past year and we ask ourselves, honestly, what might we have done better? What can we do better in the future? We repent, we return to the ideal we wished we could have been a part of the first time. You can think of it like a dialogue: a person makes a statement and then you respond, you reply, you return to them a statement of your own. And you might even say you are talking to God. Our reply is our return, our *teshuvah*.

You will not be surprised, perhaps, to learn that the word *teshuvah* shares a grammatical root with another word, a word that actually seems contradictory at first glance. The can form *teshuvAH* - “return” – and also *teshuvOT*, “answers.” On one hand, this doesn’t make a lot of sense. If we feel guilt, then we feel guilt. There are no questions involved in what we did or even why... just guilt that we chose to take that action, or more often than not, the inaction, in the first place.

But, to play Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof* – on the *other* hand – one leads to the other. First *teshuvah*, repentance, and then *teshuvot*, answers. For when we truly repent, when we plumb the depths of our souls to give ourselves honest self-critique about who we are, we *do* find answers. We see the paths not taken, and learn how to become who we want to be.

There is a story about Rabbi Israel Salanter, considered one of the founders of the Mussar movement. This is a movement that tries to look at ourselves, *tikkun middot*, to look at our own characteristics and say ‘where is the middle, for me? Not for everybody, but where is my middle?’

One day a well-respected rabbi boarded the train to take him to the town of Vilna for an extended visit with his son-in-law. He settled into his seat; next to him sat a young man who was more than a little impudent.

The rabbi slurped his coffee. The young man complained and the rabbi obliged him by not drinking. The rabbi opened the window. This time the young man complained that the compartment was too cold, and the rabbi obliged him by closing the window. And so the train ride continued, the young man going on about one thing after another, voicing his complaints disrespectfully, and the rabbi going out of his way to comply with the young man’s demands. Whatever the young man asked, the rabbi gave him. This fellow, of course, had no idea that the man sitting next to him was a rabbi, let alone the great sage Israel Salanter,

founder of the Mussar movement, which promoted the idea that religious study must be accompanied by ethical behavior.

When the train arrived at the station in Vilna, the entire Jewish community was there to greet Rabbi Salanter. The young fellow saw the reception being given to the man who had sat next to him on the train. “Who is that man?” he asked.

“That is the great sage Israel Salanter,” someone replied.

The young man’s face fell. Suddenly he was ashamed of his horrid behavior. He knew an apology was called for, so he made an effort to find out where the rabbi was staying.

The next day, the young man went to the rabbi’s son-in-law’s house and knock on the door. To his surprise, Rabbi Salanter was the one who answered.

Immediately, the fellow launched into his apology. “I didn’t know who you were. I’m so very sorry,” he said.

Rabbi Salanter forgave him, which frankly, is what we would expect of a sage, forgiving someone even if that person has wronged him in some way. Clearly the behavior of the young man was wrong—there was no excuse for it—but the rule is that if someone wrongs you and apologizes, you’re not supposed to be hardheaded about it; you’re supposed to say “forgiven” and that is exactly what the great rabbi said.

But Rabbi Salanter went further. He asked the young man what had brought him to Vilna.

“I came here because I want to earn a living as a *shocheit*,” the man replied, expressing his wish to become a ritual slaughterer of meat.

“You know what?” [Because again, it is all fairy tales] Rabbi Salanter said. “It happens that my son-in-law is a *shocheit*. He can help you learn.”

The young man didn’t know what to say; he was overwhelmed with gratitude.

Rabbi Salanter introduced the young man to his son-in-law. It turned out that the young man knew very little; he was not at all prepared to work as a *shocheit*, even at the level of an apprentice. Rabbi Salanter quickly realized this and said, “We need to set you up with lessons in order for you to realize your dream.”

So the son-in-law began to teach this young fellow and got others to help in the process. It took a number of months, but the man learned the trade, passed the necessary exam, and was given a license to work as a *shocheit*.

The next step, of course, was to find the young man a job in his chosen trade. So Rabbi Salanter, together with his son-in-law, found the man a position in a community not far from Vilna [again, this is a fairy tale as he instantly found a job].

The day the young man was scheduled to leave for his new position, he stopped by the son-in-law’s house to say good-bye to Rabbi Salanter and to thank him.

“You’re welcome. We wish you success and hope that everything will be good for you,” said Rabbi Salanter.

“Before I go, I have a question to ask you,” the young man said. “When I behaved the way I did on the train and I asked you for forgiveness, you forgave me. That I understand. I realize that that’s what we’re supposed to do when somebody asks for forgiveness. But after all I had done to you and the way I behaved toward you, I don’t understand why you didn’t just leave it at that. You forgave me, but then you went out of your way to help me. Why?”

Rabbi Israel Salanter sighed, and looked the young man straight in the eye. “You see, I know human nature,” he replied. “When you asked me for forgiveness, I forgave you with my full heart. It was with no hesitation and with no holding back. However, human nature being what it is, when somebody wrongs you—as you did me—there is a residue of ill feeling in the heart. Something remains, and that’s not healthy. It’s not good to have such feelings. And I know that the only way you can rid yourself of such ill will is by doing good for the other person. So I resolved that if there was any way in which I could help you, I would help myself through the process of helping you. You see? Helping you helped me rid my heart of any residue of ill feelings that I had. And so it was. And so it is.<sup>5</sup>”

Rabbi Salanter had fulfilled the obligation of *teshuvah* for Yom Kippur when he had forgiven the young man. He had done it with a full heart, according to the story. He could have been done: ‘check, done. I asked for forgiveness, I’m moving on’. But it wasn’t enough for him, he was still uncomfortable with this young man so looked for the other definition of *teshuvah* and found answer within himself, to help the man, to take positive action to counteract his own negativity, and in so doing to free himself.

Now I think the story works when we are having trouble forgiving ourselves. Think of the story again, but imagine it like a dream. The whole Rabbi Salanter story as a dream. There is an adage in dream interpretation theory, that every single person who appears in your dream, is a part of you. If a close friend shows up who is warm and affectionate, that is the part of you can express warmth and affection. If someone in your dream is harsh and critical, that’s your capacity for self-criticism that’s showing up.

With this in mind, what if we imagine that Rabbi Salanter and the young man on the train are the same person? The rabbi thought negative thoughts about himself – he judged himself, thought himself critical, was angry at the person he was and specific actions he took. And he tried to forgive himself, tried to do the right thing, but it wasn’t enough. He worked on himself individually *as a part of the larger community*, and finally realized that he had to take action to actively help himself, otherwise there would be no healing, for himself and the people he hurt. The *teshuvah*, return, could only come when he sought *teshuvot*, answers.

All of us here today are in search of those answers, for how to move ourselves along in the path toward personal growth and more compassion. For others - We *know* what it was we said to our mother that inadvertently hurt her feelings. But how can we stop ourselves from getting aggravated and blurting out the first response?

---

<sup>5</sup> *Three Times Chai*, “Forgiveness,” as told by Rabbi Reuven Bulka, 85.

We are very aware of how we made our spouse cringe when we brought up that long-ago error to win the argument. But how can we change our pattern of disagreement so that we're not passive aggressive, and only realize it after the fact?

Even for ourselves - we might well realize that we say the word "should" too much; we "should" be folding the laundry, we "should" call our sick friend more – but do we realize that the use of that word is contributing to a lower self-esteem, a feeling that we are not doing enough? And when we do realize this, how do we take it in stride, how do we forgive ourselves?

The search for *teshuvot* will bring about *teshuvah*, and vice versa. We are communally obliged to keep the covenant, and we become holy through our individual actions. It takes a village to raise every individual, no matter what age. And every individual contains a wealth of emotion. We are yin and yang, we are large, we contain multitudes. We ask ourselves this today to be honest about what we have done, and then we do our best to create a future with new, and hopefully different, mistakes. We must love ourselves, *because of* and not *in spite of* our flaws, so that we walk down this path, and continue our journey together, hand in hand.

Oh, and Adrian? He ran into the living room not ten minutes after I had put him to bed, and crawled onto my lap on the couch. And he looked up at me and smiled. And I laughed at myself and my contradictions, and I showed him the wonders of the blue gel pen. He gave me a kiss on the cheek and said goodnight. If only it were all that easy. *G'mar chatimah tovah*. May we be inscribed for a year of goodness<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> With utmost gratitude to Rabbi Michal Loving for her assistance in crafting this message.