

FROM WE TO ME

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Last November, Rabbi Liben paid me the compliment of asking me to deliver the sermon at one of our First Friday Night services, those occasional late Friday evenings at which the Temple choir performs and the Sisterhood sets out an impressive Oneg Shabbat for after the davvening. I chose as my topic the teachings of my mentor, Mordecai Kaplan, whom I described as the most influential and most controversial Jewish thinker of the 20th Century. He invented the Bat Mitzvah, he recast the language of some of our prayers so that people would not have to say things they were morally uncomfortable with, for which he was excommunicated by the Orthodox world and several of his colleagues on the Seminary faculty would leave the elevator when he would go

on. He challenged our traditional concept of God. He gave Conservative and Reform Jews a rationale for keeping some of the commandments without feeling obliged to keep them all. But that fall evening, I began by recalling my first hour with Mordecai Kaplan.

We entered the classroom, some thirty first-year rabbinical students. We sat down. Dr. Kaplan asked each of us to take out a sheet of paper and write down the names of the five greatest Jews of the 20th Century. So whom do you list? We all pretty much put down the same names: Einstein, Freud, Theodore Herzl, Ben Gurion, Justice Brandeis. (This was 1955, too early to include Sandy Koufax.) When we were done, Kaplan said “Now, next to each name, write the name of the synagogue where he davened every Sabbath.” What? Freud went to shul on Shabbos? Einstein? None of them were

regular synagogue goers. But they were Jews. They thought of themselves as Jews. The world saw them as Jewish.

Rabbinical students considered them the greatest Jews of the century. But they did not practice their religion in the way that most Americans understood what it means to be religious: believing in God and attending worship services. They were Jews by virtue of their attachment to the Jewish people and the values of the Jewish tradition.

Dr. Kaplan had proven his point. We misunderstand Judaism if we insist on thinking about it in Christian categories, theological belief and church attendance. That is where I gained the insight that you've heard me quote over the years: A Christian defines himself as a Christian by what he believes, a Jew defines himself as a Jew by whom he belongs to. We are a people, a religious community, not just a

bunch of men and women who worship the same God. And it is as a people that we learn how to sanctify time and sanctify life.

I went on that November evening to talk some more about Kaplan's unique ideas. Then as I came to the end of my talk, I reminded the congregation that I had begun by defining Mordecai Kaplan as the most influential Jewish religious thinker of the 20th Century, but we were now fifteen years into the 21st Century, and many of today's Jews are different from the ones Kaplan knew and wrote about.

There has been a major shift, a tectonic shift in recent years in the way Americans, Jews and gentiles alike, see themselves. I would describe it as a movement from We to Me. People are less inclined to see themselves as part of a larger group and more inclined to see themselves as

individuals not bound to anyone else by anything other than their own free choice.

In the world in which I grew up, a family was a unit. Parents and children, grandparents and cousins were like the fingers of a hand. Like it or not, you were stuck with each other. You couldn't declare yourself a free agent any more than one of your arms or legs could suddenly choose to do something that your brain wasn't telling it to do.

That sounds so awfully 20th Century, doesn't it, a world we may remember reading about but no longer live in. Today we see cartoons of families sitting down to dinner, we see couples in a restaurant. Are they talking to one another? Are they interacting with one another? More likely, every one of them is relating to his or her cellphone or iPad. Of all the remarkable inventions of modern technology, the one that

seems to speak to the souls of today's young adults more than any other is the "selfie." You're vacationing in the Grand Tetons or in the Caribbean, and instead of taking pictures of the scenery, you're taking a picture of yourself enjoying the scenery. You're at a special event, the World Series, the Academy Awards, and you capture the moment by taking a picture of yourself. What is going on is less important than the fact that you are there for it.

There is a word that, for me and for members of my generation meant something special, something rich in meaning, almost sacred. The word is "friend." It pointed to something we took seriously. It carried connotations of loyalty, sympathy, helpfulness. A friend was someone who would feel your pain when you hurt and share your joy when you were happy, someone whose pain and joy you would feel.

A friend was someone who would drop everything and come sit with you if you were having a hard time. Today, the word “friend” can be applied to anyone who is interested in sharing your Twitter messages or your Facebook page, and I can’t help but feel that we have lost something precious in the exchange.

This focus on Me, on the individual, has even affected the synagogue. Coming to shul used to mean joining with others, forming a minyan, transcending your singularity by becoming part of something bigger. Today, for too many people, being in synagogue is a matter of having an individual experience not a congregational experience, and if you want proof of that, you have it just a few inches from where you are sitting. Do you have any idea what I’m referring to? If you’ve been a member of Temple Israel for more than just the past few

years, you may remember the High Holy Day Mahzor we used to use. It was called Mahzor Hadash, the New Mahzor, but you probably remember it as the black one. The creators of that prayer book were four disciples of Mordecai Kaplan and its controlling ethos was that worship was a group experience, a time when you transcended your individuality. It was fashioned by Rabbi Jonathan Levine of Media Judaica, the publisher, Rabbi Sidney Greenberg of Philadelphia as the overall editor, the man who really put it together, and Rabbi Irwin Groner of Detroit and myself as contributing editors, and it was very much a volume in the Kaplan spirit. You experienced Rosh Hashanah as a member of a community: Lots of responsive readings, lots of hymns to be sung out loud. But for the last few years that we used it, even I as one of its editors had to admit that its time had passed. The new

prayerbook that you have at your seats, Lev Shalem, I think is a work of genius. It's the perfect prayerbook for a 21st Century congregation, and that's part of the problem. It's designed for an individual worshipper to experience privately, virtually no congregational readings but lots of beautiful, profound meditations for you to ponder alone. It's hard to imagine how it could have been done better.

And yet I miss those moments when a reading could summon each of us to transcend our individuality, to climb out of the isolation booth and be reminded of what it feels like to be part of a greater whole, those moments when the walls of the synagogue would echo the sound of five hundred or a thousand voices joined together. I miss it not because of what it says about the liturgy but because of what it says about being a person, that the fullness of our humanity

depends on our willingness to join our lives with others.

To share another of Dr. Kaplan's insights, he distinguished between what he called dependent and self-sufficient nouns. Self-sufficient nouns don't need anything else to be what they are. A chair can just be a chair. It doesn't have to be somebody's chair. It doesn't have to be part of a dining room set to be a chair. It's just a chair. A spoon can just be a spoon.

But a woman can't be a wife that way. In order to be a wife, she has to be somebody's wife. A man can't be a father all by himself. He has to be somebody's father. A teacher needs to have students to be a teacher, a leader has to have followers. That's what it means to be a dependent noun.

For Dr. Kaplan, and for me as his student, a human being

is a dependent noun. You can exist as homo sapiens. You can eat and sleep and hold a job. But to live up to the definition of a human being, you need to be in relationships with other human beings. Those relationships bring out the latent humanity in you. You need friends, authentic friends, not just Facebook friends, to be a complete person. Your latent humanity fulfills itself when you connect with other human beings in a meaningful way.

That, I will insist, is what religion is really about. It's not about having a relationship with God. It's not about performing good deeds. The word "religion" comes from the same Latin root as the word "ligament," and it means "to bind, to connect." Religion aims to connect us to other people in order to articulate our humanity and in the process to successfully invoke the presence of God. That's what the idea

of the minyan is all about, that together we can make things happen that we could never do alone.

Today's service will be a failure if it feels no different from the experience of being one of several hundred people showing up to see the same movie or hear the same lecture. There has to be some sense that the prayers, the liturgy, the chanting lift each of us out of our isolation and transform us into a congregation.

That's why paying a condolence call on a friend who has suffered a loss is a religious act and not just an act of friendship or a social obligation. Done right, it represents two souls meeting, two people together confronting their mortality and using religion to make it more bearable.

When you understand this unique emphasis at the heart of Judaism, you will understand why a child's becoming Bar or

Bat Mitzvah is more than just an expensive birthday party. It signifies welcoming the youngster into the fellowship of people who share their Jewishness and share their humanity with each other, and his life becomes something greater as a result.

Dr. Kaplan went on to make one more point about dependent and self-sufficient nouns, and it was probably one of the most radical and provocative things that this most radical of religious thinkers ever said. He suggested that “God” is a dependent noun. Just as a woman can’t be a wife without being somebody’s wife, God can’t truly be God unless He is somebody’s God. He can make the sun rise and set on time, He can send the rain in its season, but that’s not what God is primarily about. God is about inspiring human beings to behave in a human way. That’s why, in the very first chapter

of the Torah, God creates human beings in His image, unique creatures blessed with the capacity to have a relationship with Him. If there were no human beings in the world acting compassionately and morally, God would only be God in potential, in theory. It's up to us to make God real in the world.

There is a story in the Bible that each of us, myself included, has heard or read a hundred times, and I think we have misunderstood it every time. It's the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Under the influence of Hellenism, that combination of Greek philosophy and Roman power, early Christianity and rabbinic 2nd Century Judaism turned that story into something it was not originally meant to be. We've been taught to see it as the story of a woman's weakness giving in to temptation and leading to everything

that's gone wrong in the world ever since. I don't think that's what the story is there to tell us. That's a Greek idea, not a Jewish one. In fact, I have a whole chapter about that in my new book. I think Genesis chapter 3 is the story of the birth of conscience, the development in those first humans of a trait that only human beings have, the ability to know the difference between good and bad. (That was the name of the fruit, if you remember. It wasn't called the fruit you're not supposed to eat. It was called the fruit of the knowledge of good and bad.) And I want to focus on one word in that story that I, and I suspect many of you, have misunderstood every single time we read that chapter.

Adam and Eve hear God coming for them and they assume He is coming to punish them for doing something He had told them not to do. So they try to hide. God calls out to

them Ayeka, “where are you?” which I, and I suspect most of us, have always understood to mean “Where are you hiding? What make you think you can hide from Me?” But this past year, I was given reason to think maybe that’s not what God is saying.

I read a book recently by an Israeli author whose son was killed last year in the war in Gaza. The central character of the book, who represents the author and is also a bereaved father, has no name. He is simply called The Man Who Keeps on Walking. He walks all over Israel, looking for his son, hoping that maybe the notice from the Army was a mistake and his son is alive and waiting for him somewhere. And as he walks, he calls out, “Ayeka?” “Where are you, my son?”

I read that and it was like a light going on in my head that made me see the Adam and Eve story in a different light.

When they eat the forbidden fruit and they hear God coming for them, they feel guilty and hide, but maybe God isn't calling out to them "Ayeka? Where are you? You can't hide from Me to evade your punishment". Maybe God is calling to Adam and Eve "Where are you?" because He *needs* them. Without them, He can be the Creator of the world but He can't be God unless He is *somebody's* God and there are no other candidates other than Adam and Eve.

If my reading of the story is correct, the Torah's message would be: God created human beings with the unique ability to know the difference between Good and Bad, because only with creatures who share that ability with Him can God have a relationship. God must have known that this unique creature would get a lot of things wrong, because the challenge of living morally is so complicated. But it would defeat God's

purpose if we were to feel disqualified from a relationship with God because we weren't perfect, because we inevitably do some things wrong.

That's why, when we avoid coming into God's presence because we feel guilty, afraid of being judged, when we feel uncomfortable reciting prayers at home that invoke God's presence or when we feel uncomfortable coming to the synagogue because that is not something we do much of during the year and we worry that God will smell the hypocrisy, that's when God comes looking for us, calling out "Ayeka?", where are you? I need you. There are all sorts of beautiful things that you and I can make happen together. Don't hide from me because you've done things you think I won't like. God says to us, and especially on Yom Kippur, "It's not news to me that human beings make mistakes, that they

fall short of moral perfection. That's why we schedule Yom Kippur every year. We don't come here to grovel, to make excuses, to apologize. We come here to renew our relationship with a God who needs people like us, people who make mistakes and wish we were better, because God can't be God without people like us.

My friends, there is a right way and a wrong way to do Yom Kippur. The wrong way is what you were probably taught in Hebrew School when you were young: Yom Kippur is when we confess our sins to God and beg God to forgive us. The right way is to use this day to rediscover what it means to be a human being, to access our humanity by using this day to connect with other people, to move the needle back from Me to We, to reclaim and rediscover what it feels like to be needed by God, what it feels like to be part of something

greater than your solitary self, to be a member of a people whose deeds of sanctification and generosity balance out all the things we get wrong, because somewhere there is another Jew doing what we left undone. That list of sins we confess to six times during the day on Yom Kippur is not an indictment nor is it a confession. It is an inventory of habits and shortcomings we need to outgrow: the shallowness, the selfishness. It's a lesson on where we need to improve. And God stands ready to help us do that.

My friends, this day if we do it right becomes a day on which we climb out of our obsession with ourselves, we reach out to those around us, we reach inward to connect with a God who needs us even as we need Him, a God who is not out there or up there but who is right here among us, and in the process, we are reminded who we are and more importantly,

who we might go on to be.

L'shanah tovah tikatevu.