

GOD AT THE TURNSTILE

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The ancient rabbis wondered why God spoke to Moses out of a lowly bush in the wilderness, instead of from the heavens. One of them taught that God spoke from the bush to demonstrate that God can be experienced not only in the most beautiful places on earth, but even in the most unlikely spots – like, for instance, at the turnstiles at the 72d Street subway station.

We all know that at subway turnstiles there are often long lines and short tempers as streams of human beings of every variety merge into a narrow space. Usually, I'm like everyone else: I mutter under my breath as someone cuts in front of me, or is slow to fish out their Metrocard, or swipes it the wrong way, or as I wait for a seemingly endless line of people to exit before I can swipe my way in.

But sometimes, I don't feel especially rushed. Sometimes, I slow down, smile at the person next to me, and wave them ahead of me. Often, I've noticed, others interpret that wave that as a sign of weakness. They start nudging ahead, wedging into the little opening I've allowed. Many of these people just stare straight ahead, avoiding eye contact. Many pretend not to notice they're cutting me off. Many act as if they are the only ones trying to get wherever they're going.

It's interesting to me that when people are merging into a single opening – whether it be a turnstile, a subway car, a tunnel opening, a tollbooth -- things tend to take longer than they should. There are always some of us who think we're going to get there faster if we can wedge ourselves in front, or if we hold our ground and refuse to let anyone pass. When we merge into a narrow space, we naturally feel as if we're competing for limited space. We worry there won't be enough room for us. So we look out for ourselves; we put on blinders and act as if we are the only ones who really matter.

Ironically, we'd actually all move a lot faster if each of us would only pay a little more attention to others. Traffic would merge a lot more smoothly -- if there was a little more love in the world.

So we all can recognize the rush hour mess at the turnstile in today's Torah reading. The story of Hagar, Sarah, Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael is the tale of lives merging, mothers and children jostling for space and blessing. After Hagar becomes pregnant with Ishmael, she treats her barren mistress Sarah with disdain. The household starts feeling kind of crowded for everyone. And after Sarah miraculously gives birth to Isaac, things start feeling even more cramped. One day, Sarah sees Isaac playing with Ishmael in a way she doesn't like, and demands that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael. Sarah apparently feels there's no longer enough room for five people under her roof. Sarah seems to believe there's only one inheritance at the turnstile -- and she'll do what it takes to make sure her kid gets there first.

Sarah's request upsets Abraham, but God reassures him: "Don't be distressed over

the boy or your slave-woman; all that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice." The text doesn't explicitly tell Abraham to obey Sarah's request and expel Hagar and Ishmael -- it tells him to listen to Sarah's voice. We can wonder whether God was instructing Abraham not to agree with Sarah, but rather to hear her, to **try to discern the emotions** behind her request.

Maybe Sarah's resentment stems from unfounded fears which might be allayed in another way. Maybe, if Abraham had heard Sarah's underlying anxiety instead of taking her request at face value, this story might have ended differently. Maybe the three adults could have repaired the breach in their home. In the end, after all, God promises that Ishmael, like Isaac, will become a great nation. Maybe in the end, Isaac and Ishmael didn't really have to compete for the space to pass through God's turnstile. Maybe there was enough room for both of them, but no one had the breadth of vision to see it.

So many of our problems – ethnic and national conflicts, internal family divisions, our own dysfunctional behaviors -- stem from resentments based on fear of scarcity, fear that there won't be enough space, enough resources, enough attention, enough love. Jewish tradition teaches us that the deeper reality is that there is always abundance. There is always enough – if we use our God-given abilities to extract the blessings latent in this world, and if we find the humility to take up a little less space in the world. There is, in fact, room at the turnstile and in any narrow place -- as we learn in another story from two centuries ago, a story about travel on a hot summer day.

One muggy summer afternoon, the Hassidic master Rabbi Raphael of Bershad, was headed on a journey. He invited one of his students to join him in his carriage. "No, rebbe, I can't go with you," said the student, looking at the tiny compartment. "Your carriage is so small. I'll make it too crowded for you." The rebbe looked at his student and at the carriage, and smiled. "Oh, let's love just each other more," he replied. "Then there'll be plenty of room for both of us."

Love doesn't sound like an especially Jewish concept. We think of our tradition as representing justice and responsibility. Yet the rebbe didn't say, "It's a mitzvah to make room for you. I'm obligated to move over so you can come along." The answer to the problem, says the rebbe, is love. But the ahavah, the love of which Rabbi Raphael speaks, isn't an emotion; for him, love is a perspective, a lens through which to view the world.

Because each human being is created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the Divine Image, each of us meant to perfect our unique role in creation. Yet at the same time, because we each bear God's imprint, each of us is fundamentally part of a single, larger Unity. God resides both in us and between us, distinguishing us and connecting us. We are, each one of us, pieces of a sacred system, and what we call **God's love we might visualize as an invisible thread linking us to each other and to all of creation.**

A student once asked Rabbi Schmelke of Nikolsburg, "The Torah commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves. But how can I do this, if my neighbor has hurt me?" The rabbi answered: "You must understand that verse correctly. It means **love your neighbor like something which you yourself are**. For all souls are one. Each is a spark from the original soul, and this soul is inherent in all souls, just as your soul is in all parts of your body.

It may happen that your hand makes a mistake and strikes you. Would you then take a stick and hit your hand, because it lacked understanding, and increase your pain? It's the same if your neighbor, who is of one soul with you, wrongs you for lack of understanding. If you punish him, you are only hurting yourself."

"Love your neighbor as yourself." For Rabbi Schmelke, the verse teaches not that we should feel love for our neighbor or that we should care for our neighbor as much as we care about ourselves. For him, love your neighbor as yourself teaches us to remember that **we are our neighbor, and our neighbor is us**. How can we love another human being, especially one who has wronged us? By expanding our definition of ourselves to include that person. *Ahavah* -- love -- is identifying oneself with others. *Ahavah* -- love -- is a sacrifice bunt.

You don't see many sacrifice bunts in baseball anymore. You don't make the big bucks by leading the league in sacrifices. Former Governor Mario Cuomo once made this memorable observation:

The idea of community, the idea of coming together -- we're still not good at that in this country. We talk about it a lot. In moments of crisis like the Depression, we are magnificent at it. At those moments we understand community. In baseball, you do that all the time. You can't win it alone. You can be the best pitcher in baseball, but someone has to get you a run to win the game. It's a community activity. You need all nine people helping one another. I love bunt plays. I love the idea of the bunt. I love the idea of the sacrifice. Even the word is good. Giving yourself up for the good of the the whole. That's Jeremiah. That's thousands of years of wisdom. You find your good in the good of the whole. You find your own individual fulfillment in the success of the community. The Bible tried to teach you that and didn't teach you. Baseball did.

In the old days, a sacrifice bunt was called "giving yourself up" for the good of the team. But Judaism understands bunts a little differently. A sacrifice bunt doesn't mean "giving yourself up" -- it means understanding that one's well-being is inextricably linked with others' good. Bunting is not diminishing ourselves; it's expanding our sense of self to include the team. In this sense, bunting is an act of love.

No one knows more about bunting than parents. Parents don't compete with their children -- they empathize with them, feel their disappointments, share their joy in their achievements. They don't feel threatened by their kids -- they share what we have without regret or resentment. They understand their kids' needs as their own.

Parents identify with their children and yet see them as separate, autonomous individuals. Parents do their best to teach the basic rules of merging traffic: Be aware of others. Negotiate and compromise generously. See your good in the good of the whole. Remember to yield to others with a smile. In our family, we tell them, there's no need to jockey for position; there's plenty of room, plenty of love for everyone.

Like a family, a synagogue is where we are supposed to learn to bunt, to see our individual selves as a significant part of a greater whole. In a congregation, we learn to compromise, to empathize even with people we don't know and with whom we're not particularly friendly. In a congregation, we learn to do something not because we may

benefit personally, but because we connect our welfare with the good of others, even apparent strangers. In a congregation, we learn how to make space for others because we know there's a place for us.

For me, the Bible's most moving love story isn't the story of Jacob and Rachel or Samson and Delilah or the Song of Songs. The Jewish view of love is best illustrated by the story of Jonathan and David who, by all rights, should be mortal enemies. Jonathan stands to succeed his father, Saul, as King of Israel. But God strips the crown from the House of Saul and anoints David as the next king.

In a book filled with bloody battles of succession, it's striking that Jonathan doesn't resent David, his competitor for the throne. While King Saul plots to kill David, Jonathan assuages his father's anger. At the risk of his own life, Jonathan saves David from Saul's murderous rage, and they swear a covenant of eternal friendship. In the end, it is Jonathan who's killed by the Philistines. "How have the mighty have fallen," cries David over his fallen friend. "I am grief-struck over you, my brother Jonathan.... Your love was more wondrous to me than the love of women" (II Samuel 1: 19, 26). What's this love of which David sings? What accounts for natural rivals becoming friends, perhaps even lovers? What enables people to feel unthreatened by those they would normally view as competitors?

Jonathan himself supplies the answer. When he sees his friend David for the final time, they part with kisses and tears. "Lech I'shalom," says Jonathan to David. "Go in peace. What the two of us have sworn in the name of God shall be forever. **God shall always be between me and you**, and between my seed and your seed." Jonathan understands that love means understanding God as the thread binding two into one. So without resentment, he waves his competitor David ahead through the turnstile to pick up the crown, and then he slides on through right behind him. Give me the choice of being the father of King David or Jonathan, and it's no contest. I'll take Jonathan anytime.

Torah teaches that "the stranger who lives with you shall be as the native-born; you will love him as yourself, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Lev. 19:34). This is the Jewish way: to make room for others. Make room, says God, because from your history **you know what it feels like** to be outsiders. Make room, because **you know what it feels like** to feel cramped; you've lived in Mitzrayim -- literally, a narrow place. I brought you through the wilderness, a vast space where you could grow without feeling crowded. And there, at Sinai, I reminded you: when you get to your own Land, **make sure you make room for everyone**.

In our prayers, just before we close our eyes to chant sh'ma, we sing a prayer describing God's love for us. And as we do, we bring the threads of the tzitzit together. Like our individual selves, these threads remain separate and distinctive, even as we weave them into a unity. *Baruch atah Adonai*, blessed are You, Adonai, we sing, *habocheh b'amo Yisrael b'ahavah*, who chooses Your people Israel in love.

"Eventually," wrote Norman MacLean, "all things merge into one, and a river runs through it." Genesis says: "*Ve-nahar yotzei mei-eden l'hashkot et ha-gan*. A river emerges from Eden, to water the Garden." We remember today that each of us is a distinctive piece of a Unity. Through us and between us runs a river connecting and nourishing each part of

our selves, and linking us to each other. We can understand God's love as an invisible, infinite stream infusing our lives with connection and meaning, every second of every day.

We enter this New Year riding in a carriage which feels increasingly crowded and hostile. There are legitimate reasons to feel fearful and angry. But today, let's remember that responses which arise from a place of fear rarely address the roots of our problems. Let's question those who would manipulate our fears for their own purposes. Let's examine how much space we actually need to occupy. Let's look for the existing, abundant resources that can meet the needs of the truly disenfranchised, the hungry, the homeless.

We travel in a carriage filled with too many people who feel crowded, people who push and shove and shoot and kill. May we respond, like the rebbe, with more love for ourselves and each other, with deeper generosity and greater empathy. May we build families and communities in which we learn to see ourselves as part of a greater whole, in which we see others not as threats, but as reflections of ourselves. May we learn to disarm hate both through justice and through love. This year, may we be blessed to build a carriage in which we know, in our minds and our hearts, the simple truth that there's room enough for us all.