“The Bread of Sinners” - a Theology of Welcome
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Over the past year I’ve found myself returning to a brief teaching by, of all people, Pope Francis. Responding to a desire among some within the Church to deny Communion to pro-choice politicians, “The Eucharist,” he said, using the formal term for the consecrated bread and wine, “is not the reward of saints, but the bread of sinners.”

This isn’t the setting, and I’m not the person, to go into an explanation of the role of the Eucharist, or what the Pope meant in this particular context, but it doesn’t matter, because even if I’ve completely misunderstood him, the phrase became like one of those seemingly random snatches of song that you can’t shake, and you come to realize it’s trying to tell you something important.

Maybe it’s because so much rabbinic energy in the Conservative movement was devoted to gatekeeping, maybe because after decades participating in that work I find myself on the other side of some of those gates; maybe it resonates with my own private psychic makeup, or maybe it’s a common human reaction. For whatever reason, I find this the message that I am invited into the work of the community not in spite of my brokenness but because of it deeply compelling.

Even without knowing for sure what it means to Catholics, I’ve been thinking about how it might function in a Jewish context. What is the Torah, if you will, of this radical welcome? My point isn’t to show that Tradition is in favor of Good Stuff: if we need to see the texts that are in favor of kindness or against oppression before we’re willing to accept those values as our own, then we’re in deep trouble. Rather, my hope is that in our exploration we can find particular insights about welcoming and being welcome which can help us imagine and then start to build a different kind of relationship with others and even the very concept of otherness.

“Bread for the sinner.” Do we have a medicine, a therapy, to offer the broken? The Sages suggested as much in an ingenious bit of wordplay. In the second paragraph of the Sh’ma we read, *V’samtem et divrai eilah al levavchem* - place these My words on your heart. The Talmud puns on that first word, and reads it *v’sam tam* - a perfect drug; these words are a perfect drug for the heart. The world may wound us, but our encounter with Torah can help ensure that we’re not crippled. It’s like physical therapy for the soul

Seen that way, the “bread of sinners” is that work-out, *teshuvah* we call it, and the community is a spiritual fitness center. Do I want that center to be exclusive, the preserve of the already-in-shape and the strictly serious? No! I’m not in such great shape myself, and I’m certainly not always serious about working on my character. I need a place where I will be welcome. I also need a place that will welcome others.

Let’s stay with the image of “fitness” just a little while longer. Think about coaches. Think about friends. Think about the stranger on the sidewalk who reaches out a hand when we’re about do something really stupid on one of the machines. Responding to the Torah’s command that we rebuke our failing neighbor rather than smoldering inside, Rabbi Tarfon said, “I would be surprised if there is anyone in this generation who can receive rebuke. If someone says to another: Remove the splinter from between your eyes, the other says to him: Remove the log from between your own eyes.” But that’s only half the story. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria responded: “I would be surprised if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to give rebuke” - in a way that can be received, that is. And so, to the extent I need to do teshuva, I need to have others to spot me, and I need to learn how to spot others as well. That’s not easy. But it is within reach, because one doesn’t need to be learned or pious or extraordinarily smart or even particularly good to do this. At any given moment, no matter who you are, can do this.

But even without the hard work of giving or taking rebuke, there is still a role for the Other: not as a coach, not as a spotter, but just as a friendly presence. That was how our Rabbis imagined Aaron, the High Priest:

> When Aaron was walking down the road, and he came upon a wicked person, he would wish him *Shalom*. The next day, when that man wanted to sin, he would say: Alas! How will I be able to look Aaron in the face; I will be so embarrassed when he wishes me *Shalom*. And so this man would stop himself from sinning. (Avot d’ Rabbi Natan 12:3)

Let’s sit with that for a moment and take it at face value: What would it feel like to receive the kind of greeting that can make you want to be better? And let’s take another moment: What would it feel like to be the kind of person who can give that kind of greeting? Pretty good, no? If teshuva is the bread of sinners, then, we want an other at our table to share it with.

Perhaps, though, we’re beyond therapy of teshuva, perhaps we need something more than just a cure; we need to be saved, to be revived. What kind of bread can save us from death?

Tzedaka tatzil mimavet it says in Proverbs, justice-giving saves one from death. Saves whom? The recipient? The giver? Or is there something about a truly just community that takes us out of the roles of giver and receiver so that no one is always the helper or only the helped, but makes us all partners in the life-giving dance. It is not any one instance, but the ongoing interplay of justice that saves from death, and to engage in that dance we need those others as partners.

Is justice too hard, too demanding? Especially at this time of year, when we ask God to shift from the aspect of righteousness to the aspect of mercy, of loving-kindess. And loving-kindess, as well, has a life-giving quality. What is it that we say in Amidah, "Mchayeh meitim berachamim rabim" that God revives the dead with great "rachamim"? I want to pay attention to that preposition "bet", which sometimes means "in" but also means "with" as in "I wrote *with* a pen". Rachamim is the very instrument of revitalization; it is what God uses to give life to the dead.

How? Why? The Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas picked up on the fact that the word *rachamim* is connected to the word rechem, womb. Now, it's not for a cis-male to define "womb-liness" or for another cis-male to learn what the experience of having a womb is from that, but in his imagination the womb suggests the quality of making space in yourself for an other - and, I would add, nurturing that other precisely so he or she can separate off from you with not a little pain. God's making-room for us, what the kabbalists called *tzimtzum,* is what gives us life, and the death-defying comfort of making room for the other *as other* is available to everyone who wants to engage in it. So, too, the revitalizing feeling of being accepted as other as well. We can be revived by practicing rachamim as well as by receiving it, but again, we need the other to make it happen.

One last thing, and here I'll go back on my word about not talking about the Eucharist. If partaking of the consecrated bread and wine means anything to the believer, it is an experience of God's presence in physical form, and so perhaps it is that intimacy itself that is the bread of sinners. Judaism has nothing like that, certainly not since the destruction of the Temple. There is no "presence of God" to keep others away from - but I do think that there is a Presence we can invite others to. Perhaps you're ahead of me - you recognize that in Judaism the closest thing there is to a presentation of the sacred in the physical is indeed another person - the *tzelem*, the image of God.

There is a temptation when people hear this to think that this suggests a discipline of trying to see through, or past, all the weird non-Godness of the other, to see that Divine spark we all share, unsullied by those particulars that distinguish You from Me. Yet that approach would encourage us to ignore the very person in whom we're supposed to

see God, to make them transparent, as it were - which is to make them invisible. On the contrary: it is in the very distinctiveness of the other that we are invited to recognize God.

> “See the greatness of God,” the Talmud teaches,”For a person will stamp multiple coins with one mold, and they are all similar to each other. But the supreme King of kings, the Blessed Holy One, stamped all people in the mold of the first human and not one of them is similar to another.” (Sanh. 37a).

It is in our multiplicity of form, our infinite diversity, that we, together, embody the Divine image, and we encounter it, and the comfort and intimacy it offers, only when we approach an other in their full humanity; that is, their full difference.

For us, I suggest, the “bread of sinners”, the “food of the broken” is indeed there for all of us. It takes work, though - the work of seeing and being seen, of welcoming and being welcomed, of finding God in the very otherness of others, and seeking out that otherness. It’s hard work, and scary, this bread of sinners. But it tastes a little, just a little, like the reward of saints.