

Being In Between

I am floating on a lake, its waters still in the summer sun. I'm sitting in a kayak, with a paddle in my hands. I see my goal, an island in the distance. How do I get there? If I paddle only on the right side, I'll turn in circles. If I paddle only on the left, the same thing. What do I do? I paddle on each side alternately, varying the pressure as I see where I'm headed, where each stroke takes me. The prow of the boat moves from side to side with each stroke, right then left, right then left, but if I can keep my strokes balanced, I head in generally the right direction. I don't think that paddling on the right is somehow good and paddling on the left is bad or vice versa. What makes each stroke good is seeing where it leads me, seeing both sides taking me forward, weaving back and forth, closer and closer to my destination.

I am studying Talmud with my hevruta partner, learning *Masechet Makkot*, about the punishments that should be inflicted on people for violating laws of the Torah. Curiously, though, the Talmud states that human courts can only impose punishments for the violation of "negative commandments," for doing something that the Torah prohibits, like stealing from someone. What is the consequence for the violation of "positive mitzvot," when someone fails to do something the Torah requires, like observing this day of Yom Kippur? The rabbis notice that the Torah itself names a consequence for such violations, which is known in the Torah as *karet* or "cutting off." On the surface, the Torah seems to be saying that the person who fails to fulfill a positive commandment will be "cut off" from their people, perhaps indicating social or physical isolation. The rabbis, though, interpret *karet* differently. They say that it is a consequence imposed by heaven, but that its implementation is suspended indefinitely throughout a person's life. Because it is a consequence of not doing something, there is always the chance that the person will, in the future, fulfill the commandment they neglected. So they are suspended in between, neither punished nor exonerated, while God waits to see what they will do with the rest of their lives.

I am in meditation class on retreat. The teacher is about to start a period of meditation, asking us to concentrate on our breath. But, they say, we should expect that even though we have been meditating for days, and even though many of us have deep experience with this practice, our attention will inevitably wander. Thoughts from elsewhere will creep in, feelings from our body will distract us, and we'll find ourselves thinking deeply about that email we should answer or that person we should talk to. And then, in the midst of our distraction and our wandering thoughts, we'll suddenly remember that we're supposed to be meditating! We'll turn back to our breath and refocus for a time, only to find that at some point, our attention will once again wander, and we'll have to bring ourselves back. And that pattern of concentration, distraction, and refocusing will repeat itself again and again and again. The point the teacher wants to make is that when this happens, we should certainly not feel that we have somehow failed at meditation, that we just can't do it, that we should give up. They ask us to listen carefully when they say that the pattern of concentration, distraction, concentration, distraction is actually the practice we are learning! When our attention

wanders, and we notice and return to it, we are not failing; we are doing exactly what we are supposed to be doing. In fact, Jewish meditation teachers often call this process “*teshuvah*” because we are returning our attention to what we’re trying to do and refocusing, again and again. We wander and we return, we wander and we return. That is not a deviation from the practice; that IS the practice. Returning to the process is the goal.

Each year we come to this holy day, to Yom Kippur, and we resolve to do better in the coming year than in the past, to overcome our faults, to transcend our struggles, to at long last, sometimes after many, many false starts and, perhaps, after many, many attempts, transform our beings to become better versions of ourselves. Tonight I want to suggest a different way of looking at this day. What if the purpose of Yom Kippur was not to finally get it right, not to free ourselves from the constant struggle? What if, when we have been putting so much effort into acting morally, when we have sometimes managed to be the person we imagine we could be and sometimes haven’t, we have not been failing? What if we are not meant to somehow become more than human, not meant to transcend our struggles, but instead meant to embrace them? What if the purpose of this night is not to recount our failures but instead to gain strength to reengage with them with a refreshed heart? What if what we pray for is not the dream of achieving some final victory over our weaker moments but instead the fortitude to continue to try?

The ancient rabbis see an essential tension within humanity between our impulse toward selfishness and our impulse toward selflessness, our tendency to put ourselves first and our countervailing tendency to direct our efforts in service of others. But instead of saying that one of these impulses or tendencies is bad and the other good, instead of seeing selfishness and selflessness as a binary choice, they see it as a spectrum with two poles. Between the poles, spanning the breadth of human experience, they identify five different kinds of people, spread out along the spectrum like a bell curve on a graph.¹

At one extreme, at one end of the curve, are those who have embraced selflessness to the utmost degree. These are people who live only for others, and who have banished selfishness from their lives completely. Perhaps necessarily, there are very, very few such people. In a Talmudic story I’ve often retold, the rabbis imagine what it would be like if there were actually a lot of people like that, if, in fact, the impulse toward selfishness were somehow “caught” and eliminated from the picture.² In their story, they do catch the selfish impulse, but even it warns them that without it, the world is finished. So instead of doing away with it entirely, they imprison the impulse for three days and do not allow it to operate in the world. After the three days they look in the whole land of Israel for an egg, evidence of life continuing, and they can’t find a single one. It turns out that without the selfish impulse in the world, much of human motivation is taken away, and the possibilities for creativity, growth, and new life

¹ Babylonian Talmud B’rachot 7a.

² Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b.

come to an end. So the rabbis are forced to release the selfish impulse back into the world to enable life to continue.

At the other extreme, the other end of the curve, are those who have embraced selfishness to the greatest degree possible. These are people who live solely for themselves, with never a thought for others. Like an infant, they see the world revolving solely around them and their needs. Luckily, there are also very, very few of these people. For the rabbis, even people who habitually commit selfish deeds like robbery should not, despite their bad actions, be considered to be one hundred percent selfish. They cannot even be called “sinners” or “wicked;” some of their deeds may be wicked or sinful, but they are not defined by the worst things they have ever done. Again, the rabbis tell a story, this time of Rabbi Meir, who is constantly harassed by thieves, so much so that he prays for them to die. His wife, Beruriah, says to him,

"What are you thinking of?! Are you relying on the verse 'Let sinners be consumed' (Psalm 104:35)? But does the psalm really mean 'sinners?' Instead, you should understand it as 'Let sins be consumed.' What is more, you should look at the end of the verse: 'And let the wicked be no more,' which implies that when sins come to an end, then the wicked will no longer be wicked. Instead of praying for these people to die, you should pray that they repent so that they will be wicked no more."³

Rabbi Meir takes Beruriah's advice and prays for the thieves, and they do in fact turn in repentance and are wicked no more.

Further away, but still somewhat close, to the extreme of 100% selflessness are those, perhaps like the (former) thieves of the story, who wrestle with but ultimately manage to control their impulse toward selfishness. Unlike the first group, these people never completely eradicate the selfish impulse from their hearts, but they do manage to keep it at bay and not to allow it to control them. There are, perhaps, a few more of these people; we might see them as a little more human than the first group, since we, like them, know what it means to struggle with our selfishness. But they are still a distinct minority of humanity, since it is so difficult to exercise that control at all times. Parallel with this group we have those at a bit of a remove from the extreme of 100% selfishness, those who struggle with their inclination toward only serving themselves but ultimately give in to it. They never completely eradicate the selfless, generous impulse of their hearts, but in general they end up controlled by selfishness, even if they sometimes put up a fight against it.

So far, we have four categories of people:

³ Babylonian Talmud B'rachot 10a.

1. Those who are completely devoted to others, who have entirely eliminated the selfish impulse from their hearts; and
2. Those who are completely devoted to themselves, who have entirely eliminated the selfless impulse inside of them.

Both of these groups are, mercifully, very, very small. Then we have the two slight larger groups:

3. Those who struggle with the selfish impulse but ultimately are able to control it, even though it is never completely eliminated; and finally
4. Those who struggle with the selfish impulse but ultimately give in to it, even though the inclination to serve others is never completely eradicated from their hearts.

But there is another group, a group that makes up the large middle space of the bell curve, called in the Talmud the *beinoni* – “person in the middle” or “person in between.” This last grouping is not only where most of us fall; it is also, I want to say to you tonight, where we should aspire to live.

Rabbi Kruspedai said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah [before the Holy Blessed One]: One of wholly selfish people, and one of wholly selfless people, and one of *beinoni'im* – people in the middle. Wholly selfless people are immediately written and sealed for life; wholly selfish people are immediately written and sealed for death; and people in the middle are left [with their judgment] suspended from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur.⁴

In place of the familiar image of the single Book of Life in which everyone’s fate is written, here there are three books, and it’s pretty clear which one is the one we’re likely to be written in, the same one that, according to the Talmud, contains the names of both the Israelites in the wilderness and our greatest teacher, Moses.⁵ As I said above, the wholly selfish and the wholly selfless are vanishingly rare. So this passage is really focusing our attention on what happens to those, like most of us, who fall in between, whose names are written in the middle book, who are not wholly or even mostly selfless AND are not wholly or even mostly selfish. And the answer is... there is no answer! Judgment is suspended. The passage continues, “If they merit, they are written for life; if they do not merit, they are written for death.” Again, an answer without an answer! Clearly, we need to have merit, but how do we acquire that merit?

⁴ Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 16b.

⁵ Ibid. The Talmud uses a midrash on Psalm 69:29 to put the Israelites in the middle category, and Moses’s words in Exodus 32:32 (when he pleads with God to blot out his own name rather than destroying the people) to place him there.

Some of you may know that the *beinoni*, the person in the middle, is the focus of a book written by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the first rebbe of Chabad Hasidut, in the late 18th century, published for the first time in 1797. Now called the *Tanya*, meaning “it was taught,” the book’s original title was simply *Likutei Amarim*, “A collection of talks,” and it was subtitled *Sefer shel Beinoni'im*, “A book for those in the middle.” Rabbi Zalman quickly became the leader of the Hasidic movement in Lithuania, and he became known in Yiddish as the Alter Rebbe. He wrote the *Tanya* in Hebrew over a period of 20 years, but it was eventually translated into Yiddish for the sake of his hasidim and then into English and a wealth of other languages, in more than 5,000 different editions.

The Alter Rebbe argues that unlike those who are mainly or solely motivated by either the selfish or selfless inclination, the person in the middle “is motivated by both inclinations and must continually struggle to bind the selfish to the selfless.”⁶ The person in the middle is constantly wrestling with both inclinations within themselves, trying, in the words of Psalm 34, to “turn from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.”⁷ The way of the person in the middle is neither to triumph nor to give up but instead to stay engaged in the struggle. This involves somehow mediating between opposites, between the selfless and the selfish, in order to “bind them together.” The person in between does not reject the creative potential of the selfish inclination. After all, that is the impulse, in part, that motivates us to bring newness into the world, to reproduce, to achieve, to change. At the same time, the person in between does not ignore its down sides, the way it can blind us to the needs of others and lead us to use them for our own purposes. In parallel, the person in between does not reject the potential for good that selflessness can bring into our lives. After all, it is what enables us to experience so much that we value most highly, from love to justice, from equality to mercy. At the same time, the person in between does not ignore its downsides, the way in which it can abstract us from the messiness of reality and put universal principles ahead of care for those around us. In between, we see and embrace it all.

So if we can see the good and bad points of both inclinations, what does it mean to say that we are trying to engage with them in order to “turn from evil and do good”? The answer is found in the next phrase, which instructs us to “seek peace and pursue it.” As people in between, we seek to create a peaceful balance between selflessness and selfishness, to find the delicate spot of equilibrium amid these two competing impulses, to form a dynamic system that constantly tries, always imperfectly and incompletely, to turn both impulses together toward the good. The good news is that our failures are always temporary, the whirlwind of impulses always morphing into new configurations that allow us to try again. The bad news is that our successes are equally fleeting. Each day, each hour, each minute we must rejoin the attempt, as our impulses slip out of our grasp and we must grab hold of them and try to direct them once again.

⁶ *Tanya: The Masterpiece of Hasidic Wisdom*, trans. Rabbi Rami Shapiro (Skylight Illuminations, 2010), p. 5.

⁷ Psalm 34:15.

The support that the Alter Rebbe offers to those of us in the middle is to help us try to see that in our everyday life we have moments when the separations and oppositions drop away, when we see the divine revealed in the world, the spiritual revealed in the physical, the mystical revealed in the earthly and mundane. He gives the example of eating a delicious and beautiful meal, which could be a selfish act, but which also contains a spark of holiness that could lead us to compassion and goodness:

...eating a meal...is a neutral act. But if done to make your mind more receptive to the teachings of Torah, or to honor the Sabbath and festivals, your intention to serve God elevates the act and all involved in it in service to God.⁸

What seems so abstract can become very concrete when we connect everyday acts to what could ennoble and elevate them. Despite the challenges faced by the person in the middle, they are actually, among all the groups, uniquely well placed to realize the synthesis of the competing impulses that are at the heart of human experience, from infancy to old age.

There is something else important about the Alter Rebbe's focus on the person in between. At the heart of *hasidut* is the basic mystical insight of Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism, that while we experience the world as full of separations and divisions – like the separation between light and darkness in the first story of creation that I talked about on Rosh Hashanah – the deeper reality is that every aspect of the world is essentially and completely connected. If we believe that God is truly and radically One, suffusing all existence, then there is no real separation between light and darkness, between you and me, between the divine and the human, and even between selfishness and selflessness. They are all aspects of the same Oneness, the ultimate reality of the universe. This is heady stuff, easy to say but hard to grasp. The image of the person in the middle, struggling to connect seemingly opposite impulses, gives us a place for this idea to land. It makes it possible to think that in our everyday struggles to do good, to shape our impulses and push them in the right direction, we are enacting the deep knowledge of our connectedness with the divine presence each minute.

Of course, that's not what it always or even mostly feels like to be in the middle, to be in between. It feels confusing and frustrating and infuriating and all of the ways that we feel when we can't see our intentions coming to fruition in our actions, when we're blocked by our own faults, when we run into the same situations again and again and can't seem to make them come out right, even when we know how they should go. This is what we tend to remember at this moment, on Kol Nidrei – all of the times that it didn't work for us, all of the places that our self-critiques can find a home. We forget, though, about the times when it did work, when we channeled our aspirations for ourselves and for others in a harmonious direction, when we felt the satisfaction and joy of a moment of connection between us and other people or even

⁸ *Tanya*, p. 23.

between us and the divine, those shining moments that rise up out of the messiness of our lives and inspire us and keep us going.

It is sometimes exhausting to be people in the middle. We look toward the ends of the spectrum, and the grass looks so much greener there. How nice it would be, we might think, to be untroubled by selfish thoughts, to calmly and knowingly always seek the welfare of others and not our own. Or how relaxing it would be, we might muse, to be freed from the mutterings of our conscience, to act solely for ourselves without a care for others, to be purely selfish. Sometimes we see people acting out these fantasies in movies or plays, and sometimes even in real life. But when we think about it, we know that the extreme ends of the spectrum are not the places for us to grow and thrive.

So tonight, let's own our identity as people in the middle, people in between. Let's open ourselves up to the possibility that there will be no final victory of us against ourselves, that when we, please God, come together again a year from now, we will still be enmeshed in our struggles. There will be no moment when we will finally triumph over the tensions we contain. Instead, tonight we take a breath and gather strength from each other to continue to wrestle with the impulses inside us and to push them in the direction of holiness. We identify with the constant course correction of the kayaker, the suspended sentence of the person who has not, yet, completed the commandment but still could, and the constant return to the intention of the meditator. This is our *teshuvah*, our return, not once and for all, but day by day and hour by hour, as we, the people in the middle, the people in between, continually strive to sanctify our lives.

G'mar hatimah tovah.