



Fostering I-Thou Relationships in Jewish Communities

— SHARON LEVIN

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This piece brings together classical Jewish texts, ethical concepts, and insights from the psychoanalytic tradition to characterize the kind of ethical relationship that can serve as a foundation for safe and flourishing Jewish communities. Study texts and discussion questions are provided to help explore the qualities of covenantal relationships, or what Jewish theologian Martin Buber called “I-Thou” relationships. Such relationships honor dignity and uphold sacredness. They prevent abuses of power in which individuals or institutions treat a person as an object or means to an end.

INTRODUCTION

Humans are wired for bonding, and we thrive when engaged in healthy relationships with others. Synagogues and other Jewish communal spaces provide us with an opportunity to be seen, heard, and known. Ideally, our Jewish institutions create a space where we feel safe, where we are able to be our most authentic selves, and where we can form close and meaningful connections with others. That sense of belonging is why so many people consider their synagogues, schools, and Jewish communities their second homes. And research demonstrates that individuals involved in communal life live happier, healthier, and more fulfilling lives.⁽¹⁾

Jewish communal life has an organizational component made up of legal contracts, budgets, and policies, and a covenantal component involving personal relationships and a commitment to participate in sacred activities. In the modern synagogue, for example, a rabbi engages in a contractual, paid,

employee-employer relationship with the congregation. Scholars Anson D. Shupe, William A. Stacey, and Susan E. Darnell explain that in contractual relationships, a person's role matters more than who they are as a person: "In contractual social relations, such as classic buyer-seller transactions, participants signal their intentions through the process of negotiation with the goal of reaching mutual agreement. Contractual exchanges are organized positionally, which means that it is the category (e.g. employer-employee, customer-salesperson) into which participants fall that shapes relationships, and there is a sharp distinction between role and person" (*Bad Pastors* 44). The rabbi has a defined role and delineated tasks and is monitored and evaluated by a board. This contractual aspect of the relationship is critical, establishing boundaries and creating safety for both the rabbi and congregant.

At the same time, we know that a relationship with a rabbi is much more personal than that of a merely transactional exchange, resembling the kind of covenantal bond that one sees within families. In covenantal relationships, we experience true, authentic bonds of caring and commitment to each other's well-being. As Shupe, Stacey, and Darnell explain, "Covenantalism integrates role and person, which means that it is the unique essence of the individual (e.g. soul, personality) that shapes relationships i.e. one relates to the other as a 'thou' rather than an 'it'" (*Bad Pastors* 44). While a contract may stipulate that the rabbi needs to show up at a funeral, it is the covenantal aspect of the relationship that creates a situation of genuine caring and a personal wish to be present, contract or no contract.

The Hebrew word for *covenant* in the biblical tradition is *brit*. *Brit* refers to a relationship between two parties, most often between God and the people of Israel, defined by love and commitment. From Noah to Avraham to the Children of Israel after the revelation at Sinai, Biblical texts show God and the Jewish people continually renewing their covenantal commitment to each other.

Covenantal bonds are deeply personal and relational, where both parties respect the dignity of the other. Because of the personal and emotional nature of the covenantal connection, betrayals of this type of relationship are devastating. In Jewish communities, such betrayals may take a wide range of forms, from subtle comments to sexual violations. These behaviors lead to shame and disconnection, resulting in great harm to individuals and to the community as a whole. That is why it is so important to take an honest look at the quality of our interpersonal connections within our communities:

- Are our communities inclusive and open to all who want to belong?
- How do we communicate the value of each individual? How do we both support and uphold the dignity of those who are vulnerable?
- How do we distinguish between close and personal relationships that are healthy and those that have crossed a line into an unsafe space?

Traditional Jewish texts, modern Jewish thought, and psychoanalytic theory all provide insights that address these questions.

PART I. CLASSICAL JEWISH TEXT

STUDY TEXT 1

Genesis 1:26-28

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים וְאֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה
בָּרָא אֹתָם:

וַיְבָרֵךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ
וּכְבָּשׁוּהָ וּרְדוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיַּי הַרְמִשָּׁת עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

And God created humankind in the divine image,
creating it in the image of God—
creating them male and female.

God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the
earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and
all the living things that creep on earth.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- What is the difference between an image and the original?
- In what ways does the idea that YOU are created in the image of God impact the way you view yourself?
- In what ways does the idea that EVERYONE is created in the image of God impact the way you view others?
- How does the idea of *b'tzelem Elohim* (created in the image of God) resonate with you? Are there other related concepts that come to mind?

COMMENTARY

Viewing others as created in the image of God, *b'tzelem Elohim*, can help us to pause after experiencing our initial reactions to people. We are called upon to reevaluate our automatic assessments, judgements, and prejudices about the individuals we encounter. The meaning of the Genesis text seems to be that despite one's appearance or behavior, every person should be accepted and treated with respect. What if we were to dive deeper into our understanding of how Jewish text views a person's worth? The following Talmudic text speaks to that question:

STUDY TEXT 2

כיצד מאימין את העדים על עדי נפשות, היו מכניסין אותן ומאימין עליהן. ושם תאמרו מאמד, ומשמועה, עד מפי עד ומפי אדם נאמר שמענו, או שם אי אתם יודעין שסופנו לבדק אתכם בדרישה ובחקירה. הו יודעין שלא כדיני ממונות דיני נפשות. דיני ממונות, אדם נותן ממון ומתכפר לו. דיני נפשות, דמו ודם זרעיותיו תלויין בו עד סוף העולם, שכן מצינו בקזן שהרג את אחיו, שנאמר (בראשית ד) דמי אחיה צעקים, אינו אומר דם אחיה אלא דמי אחיה, דמו ודם זרעיותיו. דבר אחר, דמי אחיה, שהיה דמו משלף על העצים ועל האבנים. לפיכך נברא אדם יחיד, ללמדך, שכל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו אבד עולם מלא. וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו קיים עולם מלא. ומפני שלום הבריות, שלא יאמר אדם לחברו אבא גדול מאביך. ושלא יהו מיני אומרים, הרבה רשיות בשמים. ולהגיד גדלתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד וכלן דומין זה לזה, ומלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא טבע כל אדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון ואין אחד מהן דומה לחברו. לפיכך פל אחד ואחד חייב לומר, בשבילי נברא העולם. ושם תאמרו מה לנו ולצרה הזאת, והלא כבר נאמר (ויקרא ה) והוא עד או ראה או ידע אם לוא יגיד וגו'. ושם תאמרו מה לנו לחוב בדמו של זה, והלא כבר נאמר (משלי יא) ובאבד רשעים רנה:

Human beings were created as a single individual to teach you that anyone who destroys a single life is as though that person has destroyed an entire world, and anyone who preserves a single life is as though an entire world has been preserved. The creation of an individual human being was done also for the sake of peace among humanity, so that no person could say to another, 'My parent is greater than your parent.' . . . And also to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be God, for if a person makes many coins from one mold, they are all the same, but the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be God, made every person in the stamp of the first human, yet not one of them is identical to another. Therefore every single person is obliged to say: the world was created for my sake. (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4.5)(2)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- What is the difference between “humans are created in God’s image” (Study Text 1) and “God made every person in the stamp of the first human, yet not one of them is identical to another” (Study Text 2)?
- What do each of these teachings communicate about the worth of a human being?
- Which teaching resonates more with you, and why?
- What is the place of these teachings in contemporary society? Do you believe that this teaching complements or contradicts current values?
- This Mishna begins by explaining how the court might intimidate witnesses before they give testimony. The Mishna explains that the court suggests that witnesses might merely be reporting hearsay and then enumerates the punishments for false testimony. Then, the court recites the passage above to the witnesses. How does the court-room setting for this teaching influence your understanding of its meaning?

COMMENTARY

Both the Genesis and Sanhedrin texts encourage us to see the inherent worth in each individual and understand that no human being is worth more than any other. We are taught that all of us possess the same core essence and that a spark of the divine exists within each of us. However, there is a more disturbing way of viewing people within the Biblical narrative, for example when Jacob steals Esau’s birthright by deceiving his old, blind father or when David takes possession of Bathsheba and places her husband on the front lines of battle so he will be killed. In both of these stories, one person objectifies another to satisfy his own needs. This effort to advance one’s own goals at another’s expense desensitizes one to others’ needs and feelings and often leads to exploitation and violence. In other words, loss of connection can lead us to situations where one is able to control or dominate another person. How, then, do we build connections to maintain safety in our communities?

Insights from modern theologian Martin Buber deepen classical Jewish teachings about human dignity and the dangers of objectification and domination.

PART II. MARTIN BUBER’S TEACHINGS

Martin Buber, a Jewish theologian writing in the 1920’s, wrote the groundbreaking *I and Thou* about the nature of human relationships, and humanity’s encounter with the Divine. Buber speaks to our view of the other, our encounter with the other, and our experience of self during our encounter with the other. He explains that “all existence is encounter” and that people cannot say the word “I” without relating to a world outside of the self. Buber then explains that there are two ways of relating to the world; “I-It” or “I-Thou.” In an “I-It” relationship, where the “It,” could refer to a person or a group of people, we see the other as someone to be categorized and who exists to serve our needs or interests. These are one-way relationships. There is not a true dialogue or exchange involved, for we do not give of ourselves, and we do not truly listen to the other. In contrast, in an “I-Thou” relationship, we have two subjects and aim to have a genuine encounter based on connection and understanding. One being encounters the other with

mutual awareness. To address another as *Thou*, Buber suggests, requires a certain letting go of one's own experience, opening up the self to encounter the other without an agenda.

Perhaps the most surprising and powerful aspect of a true encounter is not only that we experience the other on its own terms but that we also have an experience of our own true self during the moment of connection. As Buber writes:

The basic word I-You can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become, becoming I, I say You (or, I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou.) All actual life is encounter (or All real living is meeting). If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things and does not consist of things. Thus human being is not *He* or *She*, bounded from every other *He* or *She*, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world: nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbour, and whole in himself, he is *Thou* and fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in *his* light. (p 59)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- What do you think Buber means when he describes a human as "whole in himself?"
- How can Buber's insights about I-Thou relationships help us interpret the Torah's commandment to "Love your neighbor as yourself"? (Leviticus 19:18)

The experience of I-Thou is powerful and yet not sustainable, for we cannot engage with another on that level of intimate connection for long. When we start to appreciate the qualities of the other person, the I-Thou moment is lost. Even the most meaningful, respectful relationships move between moments of I-Thou encounter and I-It appreciation, as the It may become characterized as "teacher," "partner," "friend," "kind," "supporter," "intelligent," etc... Yet once an It has been experienced as a Thou, it is possible for that person to remain a Thou or become a Thou again.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- What are some examples in your life of I-It relationships?
- What would happen if you shifted into an I-Thou mode of viewing these relationships?
- Can you identify a moment of encounter in your own life?
- How can we create a culture in our communities to foster I-Thou encounters?

Buber also addresses relationships in which there is an inherent asymmetry, such as helping relationships between a teacher-student or therapist-patient. These relationships are defined by an unequal power dynamic. The helper must be present for the benefit of the student or patient, not to satisfy his or her own needs. Though it is possible to engage in I-Thou interactions within helping relationships, strict and clear boundaries are necessary.

- What are some asymmetric relationships in Jewish communal life?
- What boundaries are in place to ensure that those with less power are not reduced to being treated as an It?

Buber's categorizing of our relationships into I-It or I-Thou helps us become more aware of our intentions when interacting with people and encourages us to strive for encounters with people characterized by humanity and respect. Buber's teachings about the transformative power of relationships are reinforced by insights from the psychoanalytic tradition.

PART III. INSIGHTS FROM THE PSYCHOANALYTIC TRADITION

Eric Fromm, a prominent 20th century psychoanalyst and social critic who was raised as an Orthodox Jew writes in his book *The Art of Loving*:

The main condition for the achievement of love is the *overcoming* of one's *narcissism*. The narcissistic orientation is one in which one experiences as real only that which exists within oneself, while the phenomena in the outside world have no reality in themselves, but are experienced only from the viewpoint of **being useful or dangerous to one** (emphasis the author's). The opposite pole to narcissism is objectivity; it is the faculty to see people and things *as they are*, objectively, and to be able to separate this *objective* picture from a picture which is formed by one's desires and fears. (Fromm, 109)

Fromm challenges us to view the other person not as an object but objectively, seeing them as they truly are, not placing our own needs and wants upon them and not viewing them from the perspective of how they can be of use to us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- How does narcissism impede I-Thou relationships?
- Fromm notes that focusing exclusively on one's own fears can interfere with relating to another person objectively. But narcissism can pose real dangers to others, especially when it is a quality of leaders. What kind of fear is worth paying attention to?

Another aspect of psychoanalytic theory that reinforces Buberian insights is attachment theory. The study of attachment between infants and caregivers was pioneered by John Bowlby and his student Mary Ainsworth, who extended and tested his ideas. Attachment theory teaches that the need to connect with another is a basic, primary, biologically-based need. "Attachment is a life-long distinct behavioral system whose goal is proximity to the primary caregiver. All humans form attachments to their primary caregivers in order to survive" (Bowlby, 1988, *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*). An infant needs to develop a relationship with a primary caregiver who not only provides basic survival needs such as food, but who is emotionally attuned and responsive, helping the infant learn to regulate his or her feelings. When the infant is responded to in just the right way, he or she is able to make sense of experiences and feel seen and understood. When Buber talks about a rediscovery of connectedness in the I-Thou relationship, his account reflects our basic understanding of attachment theory.

According to Dr. Donald Winnicott, a pediatrician, psychoanalyst, and perhaps the most influential voice in the field of developmental psychology, the mirroring of the primary caregiver is what creates a sense of one's "True Self."

"What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there." (Winnicott, 1971, *Playing and Reality*)

The infant learns about him or herself through the experience of being responded to by the caregiver. Winnicott calls this "the mother," as fits his era, but we recognize today that it applies equally to any caregiver. This experience is replicated throughout our lives as we seek emotional attachments with others that replicate our earliest experiences. If we experienced a secure attachment, we are able to develop an adult love relationship with a partner, friend, or relative and depend on them for soothing, nurturing, and protection. If our early caregivers were not present for us as we needed them to be, we can repair and heal from those early experiences by finding a Thou, a True Other, such as a responsive and reliable partner, friend, therapist, or clergy member.

"When one person can respond to another in just the right way, that person for that moment is experienced as a True Other. A deep transformation occurs within the self as a result of being with a 'true other,' of being seen, loved, understood, empathized with, affirmed...As a result of the transformation...one is closer to the true self, the self one has always known oneself to be." (Fosha, 2000)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- How can an understanding of attachment theory inform how we treat one another in Jewish communal spaces?
- How does attachment theory help us understand the dangers and damage of clergy abuse?

Strong communities are built upon relationships characterized by close bonds and trust. When people feel safe, they allow themselves to be vulnerable and known, enabling them to be truly themselves. May we all work to create communities based on interconnectedness among whole selves, connections that are both deeply personal and mutually respectful.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/06/the-pursuit-of-happiness-how-do-communities-make-us-happy/241201/>
2. Translation by Sharon Levin

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