

You Are Who You Are
Rabbi Aaron Brusso - Yom Kippur 5779

Cantor Herman and I were heading to a funeral, I was driving and we were turning right from an off ramp. I waited for the car in front of me to go and then looked left. All was clear so I started to go but the car in front, though it had started to go, had slowed down and my front fender met the back of his.

Let me just add that I was kind of distracted and you would have been too if you had to listen to Cantor Herman go on and on about his baby. "She's smiling...she makes these funny noises... she coos...and when she coos its somewhere between a soprano and a mezzo-soprano...when do you think is too early for voice lessons...?"

Anyway the guy in front stops and I get out of the car to go talk to him. He opens his door and launches out shouting:

Don't you see the yield sign?!

Did you expect me to just ignore it?!

Did you want me to just turn into oncoming traffic?!

I raised my hands and said "totally my fault. I'm so sorry, I really thought you had gone." He looked at me confused, like we were acting out a scene and I had suddenly forgotten my lines. He wasn't sure what to do. I said "I'm a rabbi and he's a cantor and we are on a way to a funeral." His face lit up he reached out to shake my hand and said "Well God bless you!" He quickly looked at his intact bumper and said "no worries, have a nice day."

And that is why car insurance companies should give clergy discounts.

The point is that he was assuming a fight and he was pretty startled when he didn't get one. He had played out in his head the initial script of our interaction. The truth is as gracious as I tried to be I was just as surprised as he was that we ended in a smile and a hand shake. Its pretty extraordinary actually, I hit his bumper and in the end he blessed me.

Not an everyday occurrence. In fact I would argue that when it comes to positive human interaction we are swimming upstream and fighting the current.

We are fighting the current of our cultural climate.

Surrounded by combative talk radio, shouting heads on cable news, twitter fights and political ads that bring us right back to the middle school playground, we are marinating in a culture of short fuses. We are hearing so many things that infuriate us. Conflict is more the assumption than the exception.

We are fighting the current of our technological climate.

We are overwhelmed by conveniences that make it easier for us to get every email, text and social media notification wherever we are. But these conveniences leave us fried and strung out with less patience and attention for others. We have all been in a situation where we are having coffee with someone or in a meeting and our phone buzzes. This sets off a low level of anxiety and unleashes a voice in our head "Who was that? Was it one of my kids? Is someone desperate to reach me?" Like leaves shaken from a tree,

our focus is loosened with each vibration. We are being kidnapped by our devices and there is just less of us available for in person encounters.

And we are fighting the current of our consumer climate.

We have more choices than ever before. From brands of ketchup to types of flat screen tvs to after school activities to binge worthy shows to sneakers, we can have it all. The problem is that we can't have it all. We were not built to metabolize all the choices we can possibly consume. And we are barraged with messages that we should be dissatisfied with how we look, what we drive, where we live and how we eat. All in the elusive search for some elusive consumer happiness. "Consumer happiness" may be the most significant oxymoron of our age.

We are being lured culturally, technologically and as consumers away from the most meaningful aspects of being human, which are what they have always been: being known, being seen and being accepted for the unique and irreplaceable souls we are in the core of our being. Being present to appreciate another human being for the divine light they allow to shine in the world.

The greatest gift we can give someone is the gift of seeing them and the greatest violence we can do to someone's soul is when we estrange ourselves and turn our backs to them. And it is one of the most complicated things to figure out.

Of all the lectures, texts and concerts I experienced in Jerusalem this summer, one of the most memorable moments for me was actually a quick side conversation. We were studying with Dani Segal who is a friend of our family, a rabbi and one of the leaders

of the Hartman Institute's rabbinical training program. We were discussing texts on family relationships when one of the American rabbis in my cohort shared a conversation he had had with relatives he visited with in Zichron Yaakov near Tel Aviv.

"Dani let me ask you a question," my colleague said. "I was visiting with relatives in Zichron Yaakov and they recently sent their child to the army. The father was saying to me that he didn't trust current Israeli leadership to send his kids to war for the right reasons and that 30 years ago when he was in the army he felt like he could trust the government. Do you feel like that's a growing sentiment?"

Dani sat still with his hand on his forehead. He didn't answer right away. As a former officer in the IDF with kids of his own who would soon be in the army I imagined a number of responses Dani could have had.

But he just sat rubbing his forehead. "What was going on in his head?" I wondered.

Our cultural, technological and consumer obstacles actually exacerbate a problem we all face simply by being human beings.

The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich thinks "sin" is not when we say something mean to someone, shout at them, dismiss them, steal from them or humiliate them, he thinks these are all symptoms of the real disease. "Sin" he teaches, is at its root really "separation." The moment we separate ourselves from a person sufficiently to not see them as a person with a universe of emotion, the instant we separate ourselves from someone and

think of this person as deserving of our mistreatment, we have sinned.

And we are not to be blamed for the fact of separation. We are born into the world and immediately separated from our mothers, our source of warmth, love and care. We exist in a world where our very existence is separation. We are individuated in body and mind from everyone around us. And because of this we are fated to search after love, companionship and understanding our entire lives. If we are lucky we find them in parents, siblings, friends, partners and children. But the truth we never really solve it. We always harbor the loneliness and alienation of separation.

Tillich writes:

Who has not, at some time, been lonely in the midst of a social event? The feeling of our separation from the rest of life is most acute when we are surrounded by it in noise and talk. We realize then much more than in moments of solitude how strange we are to each other, how estranged life is from life.

Sin happens, according to Tillich when we soothe our feelings of loneliness and estrangement by marginalizing others so at least, we think, there are those more alienated than us. Sin is when we assume the worst of others in order to defend and protect ourselves against a deepening of our feelings of isolation.

Our current cultural climate of divisiveness feeds off of our natural state of being separated, it feeds off of the fears within us that make it easy to deepen difference.

While Dani was rubbing his head maybe he was thinking: “look, you’re American, do you think its fair to report on one conversation you had with one Israeli and implicitly indict our collective commitment to serve our country?”

Before we sin by separating ourselves from others we sin by separating from ourselves. Sin doesn’t come from meanness or disliking others, it begins with disliking the parts of ourselves that hunger for recognition, love and acceptance and avoiding the way those things make us feel vulnerable.

Its why Cain kills his brother. To try to destroy his feeling of being rejected after Abel’s offering was accepted and his wasn’t.

Its why Sarah banishes Hagar. To squash her feelings that her husband’s love might be divided.

Its why Jacob steals his father’s blessing. To gain his recognition.

Leah longs for her husband Jacob’s love and uses her children to seek her husband’s attention. She turns their names into cries for help- Reuven- see I have given you a son. Shimon- the lord has heard I am unloved. Levi- now my husband will be attached to me.

But as Tillich teaches “Lets not forget we are not only separated from others...we are also separated from ourselves...Cruelty towards others is always also cruelty towards ourselves.”

Cain’s isolation isn’t solved when he kills his brother. Its only deepened as he is forced to wander the earth alone.

Jacob's need for recognition is not satisfied when he steals the blessing. Years later he begs the angel he wrestles with for the blessing he never felt he really deserved or earned.

Its often hardest to overcome our separation from ourselves when we encounter people that highlight our inner vulnerabilities. Instead of accepting our vulnerabilities we tend to make someone else appear deficient.

Dani could have said "that's not surprising from some left winger in Zichron Yaakov. What's wrong with the current government? You do know they get voted in every time precisely because they make Israeli's feel safe."

So what are we to do with our tendency to make others pay for our hunger for attention, our need for appreciation, our feelings of inadequacy?

Rabbi Alan Lew's Polish born father came to this country at the age of 9 and always worked to support his family. His ego was huge and he would defend himself vehemently in the silliest arguments. Rabbi Lew, like lots of American kids loved to play basketball and his father would join him. His father couldn't shoot or dribble. The ball would go in every direction but near the basket. With every errant shot and lost dribble, Rabbi Lew's father didn't express shame or walk away or yell at his son. Instead he howled with laughter at himself.

How does it make sense that such a hard driving, perfectionist who took on every fight would be so forgiving of his ineptitude on the court? Rabbi Lew realized years later that more than his

father cared about how foolish he looked playing basketball he wanted to connect with the son he loved. On the court he accepted who he was in order to spend time with his son.

What awkwardness are we willing to overcome in order to overcome the separation between ourselves and someone we care about?

Are we recognizing the efforts people in our lives make in order to be close to us?

How does our technological climate of distraction let us off the hook from doing the hard work of reaching out?

And most critically, like Rabbi Lew's father, how do we overcome ourselves?

If sin is separation then, Tillich teaches, grace is the way back. Not the physical grace that Rabbi Lew's father lacked but the spiritual grace he displayed so beautifully.

Grace is acceptance.

Grace, Tillich explains:

strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light

breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you..."

There are certainly plenty of voices in our head. They tell us we are not good enough. These voices are amplified by a pervasive climate of consumerism. We are not successful enough. We are not smart enough. We are not beautiful enough. We are not funny enough. We are not liked enough. It is this voice that rejects who we are and teaches us to reject other people who we fear will affirm these worries we have. That is how separation within leads to separation without.

The irony is that beating ourselves up about being better people makes us behave even worse.

Sometimes we just have to forgive ourselves.

Sometimes we hear a voice. "You are who you are. You are who you are. You are who you are. You are who you are. And right now that is all you and the world need. You are accepted. As you are. For who you are."

Jacob knows he didn't deserve the blessing he stole because it never filled the hole in his soul. He begs an angel for it. He never got over dressing up as his brother. Trying to be something other what he was.

When he hears he is to meet up with his brother Esau, who he wronged years ago he knows there will be conflict. 'Of course Esau will be angry,' Jacob thinks because Esau was not given the recognition and acceptance from his father and it was Jacob's

fault. Jacob sends ahead animals as gifts. He believes naively that our deepest hurts and needs for connection can be satisfied with stuff.

He sees Esau and prepares for the worst. He has already written the script in his head. Instead Esau runs towards him, hugs him, kisses him and cries.

Totally unexpected.

Esau sees all the animals and material items Jacob brought for him and asks what they are for. Jacob tells him he wanted to “gain his favor.” Esau responds “I have enough my brother, let what you have remain yours.”

Jacob then says “to see your face is like seeing the face of God, you have received me so favorably.”

How did Esau do it? Esau somehow managed to make peace with himself. And he then was able to do the same with Jacob. To accept who he was, to accept his brother for who he is.

Esau’s graciousness opens up something powerful in Jacob. He is accepted in a way he was never by his father. In a way he sought after his whole life. He experiences God’s face in his brother’s.

And then Jacob says something astounding. He says, קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּרַכְתִּי - “please take my gifts,” but the Hebrew actually says take my “blessing.”

Years ago Jacob thought he could steal that blessing. Years later he realizes blessing cannot be taken, only given. Zero sum games

exist in the universe of separation. Blessings exist in the universe of acceptance and grace.

How did Esau overcome himself in order to free Jacob to do the same?

How do we find this grace, this acceptance?

Well, Rabbi Elie Spitz explains that that is exactly what we are doing here today. We come on Yom Kippur to feel accepted by a power that is bigger than our individual lives so that we can accept ourselves. So that we can accept others. We say Adonai, Adonai el rachum v'hanun- God of mercy and Grace, accept us, as we are, with "chen", with grace.

It is only by being kind to ourselves that kindness can grow within us towards others. When we accept ourselves we can accept others.

As Tillich explains:

We experience the grace of being able to look frankly into the eyes of another...we experience the grace of understanding each other's words. We understand not merely the literal meaning of the words, but also that which lies behind them, even when they are harsh or angry. For even then there is a longing to break through the walls of separation. We experience the grace of being able to accept the life of another, even if it be hostile and harmful to us, for, through grace, we know that it belongs to the same Ground to which we belong, and by which we have been accepted.

Sometimes when we are being yelled at by a loved one and every part of our body wants to shout back, if we stop we can hear the shout not as a rejection of us but as a cry to accept them. For who they are. As they are. Right now.

As Dani was deep in thought I imagined him saying “you know when that guy speaks like that about our country he only strengthens our enemies.”

But that’s not what he said. He didn’t say any of the things I imagined.

Instead here’s what Dani said:

“Is it different from when your relative was in the army 30 years ago. do people not trust the government to send their kids to war for the right reasons? there are two possibilities here and both could be true. One, 30 years ago Israeli leadership might have been different. And two, the guy you spoke to, 30 years ago he was a son and now he’s a father. Its just different when you send your own child.”

Dani managed to cross all distance of separation, all feelings of defensiveness, all personal fears and bias in order to know and understand the difference between going to the army as a son and being a father sending a child. To feel a father’s love for his son.

When we return to ourselves and know ourselves and forgive ourselves. When we accept who we are. We can know in our hearts that this other person has the same fears and concerns we have. We can hear criticism, anger and resentment as

vulnerability, not as disloyalty to one's country, one's people and us. Not as an insult to our values but the desperate love of a father for a son.

Not every interaction is an opening salvo for a debate with a foreign body that must be engaged.

Even if it feels like that.

If we can hang in long enough with ourselves and with the other, just wait a beat before responding, maybe we can hear something deeper going on that is more familiar to us than we could ever imagine.

May we not leap out of our cars having placed human beings in our old and worn mental scripts. May we cross all distance of cultural divisiveness, technological obstacle and the false palliatives of consumerism to return to ourselves. Quiet our minds. Fill our vulnerabilities, weaknesses and frailties with presence and acceptance.

Like Rabbi Lew's father, may we forgive ourselves our inadequacies. And with this forgiveness, like Esau, may we reach out with grace towards others. And with grace, like Dani, may we not just understand the literal words but the words behind words, to cross the universe of separation in order to be truly present, with them, for the actual person standing before us.

You are who you are. You are who you are. You are who you are. You are who you are. And right now that's enough. Its enough for you. Its enough for me. Its enough for God. Its enough.