

Shabbat B'har/Behukotai 5780
Torah and Pandemic: Y'all In This Together
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There's a word that exists in English but not Hebrew. In a way, that same word also exists in Hebrew but not English. It's the word "Y'all!"

Y'all, of course, means 'you all.' But it's much more fun to say and sweet to hear as one word than two. There's a dimension to this word that can't be translated. Sure, Hebrew - like many other languages - has a word for second person plural - *Atem*. But - Ahem - 'Atem - you plural' is formal and stiff. It's just not the same as Y'all. "Shalom, you plural" lacks the charm of "Shalom, y'all!"

While English earns a point for having the better word, Hebrew gets a point for saying it better without saying it at all. Like other languages, with Hebrew you know with each verb if it's directed to the singular or plural. This is not true in English. For example, if my wife Laura were to say in English, "Clear the table," it wouldn't be apparent if that instruction were directed to just me or the kids too. Because the verb 'clear' is the same word whether directed to one or many. But if she were to say "Clear the table" in Hebrew - "Pneh et HaShulchan", it would be obvious that it would be directed only to me (naturally). Because if she wanted the others to join, she would use a verb in a different form - "Pnu."

In other words, there's an ambiguity with you-verbs that exists in English which doesn't in Hebrew. Which is one reason why it helps to know Hebrew when studying the Torah. Because frequently we get to a verse like the following (Lv. 26 :3):

אִם־בְּחִקְרֻתִי תָּלִכְךָ וְאַתָּ-מִצְוָתִי תִּשְׁמַרְךָ וְעַשְׁיַתָּם אֶתְכֶם:

"If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments..."

This verse opens the second of our two Parshiyot this week, Behukotai. Basically, the Parsha says if the Jews *follow* G-d's Mitzvot when they reach Israel, they will be rewarded with a host of blessings: rain, fertile crops, prosperity, security, peace with neighbors, lots of children, G-d's presence made manifest. Paradise, in other words. But...if the Jews *ignore* G-d's commands in the Holy Land, they will be punished with a litany of curses. All of the positives turn to negatives. What could have been the land of paradise turns to the land of parasites. It's reward and punishment 101.

The topic of divine reward and punishment is an important one that deserves its own separate class. I can't explore all of it here. But let me say that just because the Torah outlines a theology doesn't mean that Judaism today holds that to be true. Our smartphones have system updates whereby every year the phone developers maintain the best of the previous model as well as innovate to new directions. Judaism has

system updates too. Some parts of the Torah are *timeless* - honoring parents, centrality of Shabbat, people being created in G-d's image. Yet other parts are *timely*: they made sense then but don't work today, like being married to more than one wife, wiping out all the Canaanites, and I would add this black and white picture of reward and punishment. Today I want to look at this worldview through the lens of "y'all", or the distinction between you-singular and you-plural.

When I read the verse in English, you should ask yourself, is this directed to an individual or a group?

"If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments..."

The audience is unclear. But when we add the Hebrew we see that it's unequivocally plural.

אם־בַּקְרָתִי תַּלְכֵד אַתֶּם־מִצְוֹתִי תָּשִׁמְרוּ וְעַשְׂיָתֶם אַתֶּם:

So the English should read, "If you *all* follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments..." then G-d will reward you *all* with blessings.

Today I want to interpret this verse literally and then metaphorically. First, literally because our tradition understood it this way for some time. Even though I don't personally buy this interpretation, I think we can still learn from it.

Here's why the you-singular or you-plural matters: Because those then and now who believed that G-d rewards and punishes people in this lifetime based on one's ethics and behaviors can make this reading make sense only when it's based on the majority. I can't imagine anyone then or now thinking that in any given neighborhood G-d would make it rain on some fields but not others. Could we picture a scenario where it rains - and thereby the farms produce bountiful crops and ensure wealth - on only some houses? Can we envision rain falling on the houses of Reuven and Levi because they keep Shabbat but not raining on their in-between neighbor Shimon because he's working on Shabbat? No, that just doesn't make any sense, then or now. So the plural verb allows us to understand this better on a literal level where G-d rewarded the Jews as a *whole* when the Jews as a *whole* kept the covenant. And vice versa. (Though it's sometimes hard to imagine the Jews as a whole doing anything as a whole!)

Let's take Shabbat. If the majority of Jews celebrate Shabbat, then Shabbat is a part of Jewish culture even if not everybody is keeping it. We see this most clearly in Israel, where seemingly all Jews - whether or not they make Kiddush at night and go to shul - say Shabbat Shalom to each other on Friday and Saturday. Shabbat feels different from the other days for *everyone*, not just those who celebrate the day. Because in Israel, the majority of people are Jews and recognize Shabbat as special.

We see examples of G-d punishing based on the majority. Take the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. Or Noah and the ark. Or the Egyptians in the Exodus story. We knew there

were a few decent people around in both cases. But since the majority were wicked, the whole society was destroyed. For the Torah, majority rules.

I now want to look at our verse creatively. Even those who don't believe G-d directly rewards and punishes people based on individual or collective actions, must still seek to learn something from this passage: "If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments..."

Here's my take: The world a society builds for itself is the world the society inhabits. That is, when a society as a whole values something, it comes back to shape that society for better and for worse. And this only works on the majority level, as we see the you-plural in our verse.

This works on micro levels: Camp cabins that value and include even the kids who don't fit in as well, will be more cohesive and protective of *all* its campers. And the principle holds true on global levels: Nations that value providing a social safety net for the vulnerable will benefit all if the need ever arises for them to utilize it. Our choices are in our hands, as is our destiny. But it all depends on the majority. That's why every person counts and every decision matters. Because, as Maimonides wrote, each person should see their own decisions as tipping the balance of humanity toward right or wrong.

There's a story taught by the early Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (Leviticus Rabbah 4:6), and it's retold wonderfully by Rabbi Ed Feinstein. A group of passengers are out on a boat. As the boat pulls away from the dock, one passenger takes a drill out of his bag. He puts the tool to the boat bottom and begins to drill. Yes, a hole in the boat. The other passengers see this and plead with him, "Stop! What are you doing?" The man was surprised by their protests. He wondered, "Why do you care? It's my seat and I can do as I see fit with my seat. I'm not drilling under yours." The exasperated passengers told him, "Yeah, the seat is yours but we're all going to drown!"

The punchline is obvious: we're all in the same boat. Someone's actions *here* affect everyone *there*. We all affect one another. What you do matters to me because it affects me. And vice versa. In many ways - but not all - it's unfair to say, "it's my business and I'll do what I want."

This brings me to perhaps the clearest example today, the pandemic. To defeat the coronavirus, *everybody* has to be vigilant and follow the rules of social distancing, wearing masks, and staying home especially when not feeling well. Because if one person ignores this, then a whole cluster of people gets infected. One hole will sink the entire boat. We saw that last week in South Korea where one man who was infected visited some nightclubs and now over 100 people have the virus as a direct result. To stop the transmission of the virus, *everyone* needs to follow the guidelines. We're all in this together.

That's the medical public service announcement. Here's the religious one: Indeed, we're all in this together. Yes, it's the same principle. In a similar way, an ethical culture depends on the same mentality. For a society to truly live out its values and to create a system that cares for the vulnerable, *everybody* has to buy in. To shape a world that pursues justice, *all* have to prioritize this. The Torah speaks here in the plural because life is lived with others. Because the Torah says Y'all.

Shabbat Shalom.