

Creating a Jewish Home Together

Part I: *From Me to We*

Rabbi Ruth A. Zlotnick
Temple Beth Am, Seattle WA
Rosh Hashanah 5784/September 2024

Ya'akov Yitzchak Horowitz, known as the Seer of Lublin, was the most influential Hasidic leader in Poland and Galicia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The story is told that when students came from afar to study with him, they were shocked to see that his customs differed from those of their teacher back home. The Seer exclaimed, "What sort of God would have only *one* way to be served!"¹

What an astounding claim, coming from the insular world of Eastern European Jewry. Or as my hero, the philosopher Martin Buber, explained: "The Seer taught that every person has access to God, and for each person the way is different. It is precisely in the diversity of human beings...that we find the greatest potential for humankind."²

In the last year, here at Temple Beth Am, we launched Project Bina, a unique congregant-driven, data-informed initiative which I believe might revolutionize North American synagogues.³ Through Project Bina, we can hear the diversity of all the voices in our 900-household congregation—not only our biggest fans and loudest critics, *all* TBA members, however engaged or detached from congregational life you may be. I believe Project Bina could only have been imagined and implemented in the innovation hub that is Seattle. From your responses to last year's High Holy Day survey, I know that a good number of you—more than I might have expected—come to services in part to hear the rabbis' sermon.

The role of the rabbi's sermon has changed over the years. My father, of blessed memory, liked to tell the story of seeing Rabbi Jacob Rudin, a brilliant orator, preach in the late 1950's. Dad always said that Rabbi Rudin was like Moses on Mount Sinai, a tall man with a shock of white hair, and a booming voice that rose and fell with his finely crafted words. Back then, the expectation was that the rabbi's sermon would bestow eternal Judaic wisdom to help us better fulfill our civic duties to other Americans and all "mankind." If done well, the rabbi's sermon was a heady, intellectual experience, fodder for conversation in the car ride home. For many of us, critiquing the sermon—and, sometimes, let's be honest, critiquing the rabbi too—is as much a part of Rosh Hashanah as shofar blasts and apples with honey.

While Rabbi Rudin stood on the pulpit of his mid-century suburban New York temple, preaching like Moses on Mount Sinai, the world he was addressing was on the verge of collapse.

¹ Martin Buber, *The Way of Humanity*, trans. Mehlman & Padawer, p. 11

² Buber, p. 11

³ <https://www.templebetham.org/community/project-bina/>

Within a few years the younger generation was going to break free of old social structures, questioning the authority of the older generation and creating a new social order. Look around. Those young people, those rebels and upstarts, they are our elders now. Now, it's *their* world that's being upturned by the social upheavals of a new generation; now it's *their* children and grandchildren who are toppling social structures and redefining mores. Time flies. One year ends and a new one begins.

5783 has been an interesting year, hasn't it? Thanks to the Covid-19 vaccine (may we always and forever be grateful to the scientists who saved humanity,) 5783 was our first full year when we could conduct the business of everyday life in each other's physical presence again. It was a year of normalization, and re-engagement, and coming to terms with the fact that we are survivors of the worst global pandemic in human history.

Primo Levi teaches that being a survivor is bearing witness to the past and not consigning it to oblivion.⁴ Yet, I fear there is something we *are* consigning to oblivion. I fear we've suppressed the memory of those earliest days when the SARS CoV-2 virus drove us inside, locking us down, and awakening us to how isolated we are from each other. We no longer live in the conformity of nineteenth century Poland, or even the conformity of the 1950's American suburbs. We live in a fragmented, individualistic world, where the pace of change is frenetic. Rates of mental illness, substance use, and suicide—all indicators of social isolation—have steadily risen over the last 50 years; and, not surprisingly, they've skyrocketed since Covid-19. In response to this uncertainty, too many of us, young *and* old alike, are living lives of profound loneliness, quiet desperation, and perpetual dissatisfaction.

On *this* Rosh Hashanah, *this* rabbi wants to convey the only message that I think we really need to hear in 5784:

You are not alone. We are not alone.

We're not the first generation of our people to live in a time of disruption. We are a people forged out of a moment of radical change.

(soft SHOFAR BLAST)

On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a heavy cloud on Mount Sinai, and a very loud blast of the horn;

(loud SHOFAR BLAST)

and all the people who were in the camp trembled.

Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Eternal had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

⁴ Primo Levi, *Survival at Auschwitz* as quoted in *Re-forming Judaism: Moments of Disruption in Jewish Thought*, Davids & Hochman, eds., p. 21

The blare of the horn grew louder and louder.⁵

(SHOFAR BLAST)

Can I tell you the backstory, what *really* happened that led up to this moment?

Moses, an impatient workaholic with a bit of a temper, forged ahead with his job of defeating pharaoh. It was a messy business which included blood, and locusts, and a recalcitrant ruler, and a confused and confusing throng of Israelites, *and* a mixed multitude of other folks who joined them, who knows why. Moses and his siblings pushed this mass of humanity out of Egypt and through the Sea of Reeds. Once there, the crowd looked at the cracked, sunbaked earth and cried out for water and food. God provided; still thirsty and hungry, they cried out again. This cycle continued, kvetch/response, kvetch/response, until this ragtag band of wanderers finally made it to Mount Sinai.

Moses did his best, poor guy; but he was worn down and fed up. Moses' fate was the fate of all workaholics: he had a classic case of end-stage burnout. He was cranky with others, neglected his health, and let down the people who were most important to him. Yitro, his father-in-law, brought Moses' family to him in the wilderness, "This thing you're doing, Moses, it's not right. You can't do it alone—let others help you." We can only imagine the emotions coursing through Moses as he gazed at the faces of his wife and sons.

And the Israelites—imagine how they were feeling! For years, decades, centuries even, their lives were a monotonous cycle of waking up in squalor, laboring at back-breaking work, being maligned and marginalized, then laying their bodies down at night, knowing tomorrow would be more of the same. Perhaps a few people—let's call them early adopters—saw the signs and portents and understood right away that meant some massive societal change was on the horizon. However, I bet most of the enslaved were skeptics, distrusting they ever could, would, or *will* be free.

Eventually, somehow, miraculously, this downtrodden group heard the blast of the shofar followed by the voice of God. Nothing was the same ever after. God spoke in 70 languages so everyone could hear in their own way, from the youngest to the oldest. God offered divine love to all who were gathered, to them and their descendants. They were awash in God's presence when they accepted the *brit*, the covenant. This *brit*, this sacred relationship, engenders—as all loving relationships do—obligations on behalf of the lover and the beloved.

(soft SHOFAR BLAST)

And [Moses] took the scroll of the *brit*, and read in the hearing of the people; and the people said: 'All that the Eternal has spoken, *na'aseh v'nishma*, will we do, and we will understand.'⁶

The response of the Israelites at Mount Sinai is astonishing. *Something* happened that shook them out of their misery and awakened them to act together as one. *Na'aseh v'nishma*,

⁵ Exodus 19:16, 18

⁶ Exodus 24:7

we'll act, *then* we'll understand. Their response is illogical, it defies expectations. Usually, people try to understand something before they do it. But not when love enters the picture. Love is disruptive. Love is not logical. Love overturns the natural order of things, and in this case, love transformed nomadic wanderers into a holy and whole people.

Our generation has been traumatized by Covid-19, and we won't fully understand the impact of the pandemic for years to come. In addition to social isolation, our generation faces other great moral challenges—environmental disaster, the speed of technological change, the deterioration of civil discourse, the ever-widening gap between rich and poor—and there are forces in the outside world that trick us into believing that we face these challenges alone. The danger is if we think we're alone, then we act only for ourselves, and our focus is on *me*, on my needs.

On this Rosh Hashanah, this *Yom HaZikaron*, this day of memory, let us remember we are the descendants of those dusty wanderers. We are heirs to a tradition that has withstood thousands of years of dislocations. Time and again, our ancestors found themselves in a new Egypt, and time and again, they stood at Sinai, re-committing themselves to sacred relationships. This is how the Jewish people have always cultivated resilience, joy, and meaning in a world that's never been particularly hospitable to Jews. They did this by having a consciousness of *we*.

Judaism has survived because our ancestors transmitted wisdom through what we *do*, the actions we take. The *mitzvot* commanded of us at Sinai compel us to keep a Jewish calendar, celebrate Shabbat, become lifelong learners, care for the stranger, mark milestones along our life cycles, steward the earth. Most importantly, we can't accomplish these *mitzvot* in isolation from others. One can *only* be Jewish in the context of community. Judaism urges us to move from a consciousness of *me* to a consciousness of *we*.⁷

Our tradition has always been communitarian, celebrating, as the Seer of Lublin taught, that “every person has access to God, and for each person the way is different,”⁸ When we engage in Jewish communal activities, it brings us in proximity to people we wouldn't otherwise hang out with, people quite different from ourselves, nourishing our empathy. Also, doing Jewish things allows us to time travel, leaving our post-Covid world, zipping through all the generations back to Sinai, forward to eternity, and then fully inhabiting this moment, right now. This space exists only because we collectively agree to believe in such values as *pekuach nefesh*, saving a human life, *b'tzelem elohim*, the sacredness of each individual, and *gemilut hasidim*, doing acts of loving-kindness

On this *Yom HaZikaron*, this day of divine and human memory, we will not consign the lessons of the pandemic to oblivion. In our age where everything is digitized and customized, being in community with others is a *choice*. *This* is our Sinai moment. Will we choose to shift from a consciousness of *me* to a consciousness of *we*?

⁷ “Moving from *me* to *we*,” a poignant phrase I learned from Amanda Radman, TBA's Membership & Development Director and staff liaison to Project Bina.

⁸ Buber, p. 11.

Na'aseh v'nishmah, let us do, and then we will understand. Let us do, and we will awaken to the blessing of being in each other's presence, the whole beautiful, diverse lot of us.

In the year ahead, please consider doing one or more of these three things:

1. Contribute to Project Bina—This will allow your Board of Directors, professional team and clergy to better meet the needs of our members. As I shared with Stacey Symonds, the inspirational Chair of the Project Bina Committee⁹, last year's High Holy Day survey was my gateway into understanding how totally cool data is. To all you STEM people out there: this liberal arts rabbi finally gets it. Spoiler alert: You'll be hearing more voices from Project Bina in my Yom Kippur sermon.
2. If you like awesome food-trucks, a joyous autumnal atmosphere with people truly of *all* ages, and...baby animals, please come to TBA's Sukkot festival on October 8 at 10 am. All our committees and member activities will have tables there, and maybe you'll discover a doorway into community connections that's right for you.
3. Whether you are a new member or have belonged to Temple Beth Am for years, let's learn how to engage/re-engage in communal life together. We'll have quarterly Community Engagement Trainings which will help members of any background make new relationships, new community-building skills, and deepen their connection to TBA. The session will begin with a section just for new members and will be followed by a studying with me on Temple Beth Am's values.

(SHOFAR BLAST)

This is our Sinai moment.

Na'aseh, let us create our Jewish home together.

V'nishma, then we will understand the power of love.

You are not alone.

⁹ Project Bina Committee Members: Heather Camp, Corinne Fligner, T. J. Stutman, Rachel Zerrell