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WHO AM I?

*Today you are you. That is truer than true.
There is no one alive that is youer than you.*

Dr. Seuss, Happy Birthday to You

BEING TRUE TO ONESELF

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, one of the great sages of the last century, made a remarkable statement: “I, with all my abilities, potentials, and talents, both physical and spiritual, am unique in the universe. Amongst all those alive today, there is no other me. In past generations, too, there was no other me, and until the end of time there will be no other me.” This uniqueness is not an accident, the random outcome of genetic variation. Rabbi Wolbe continues, “And if so, the Master of the Universe must certainly have sent me here on a special mission that could be fulfilled by no one else but me—with all my uniqueness.”¹

To be true to myself, I cannot be the way I am because of what someone else does. Nor can I determine my self-worth by comparing myself to others. The great Chassidic master, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, stated, “If I am I because I am I and you are you because you are

1 Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, vol. 1, p. 68.

you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you.”

The point is that I must actualize my own God-given potential and not to try and become someone else. Only then can I live authentically and with the appropriate human dignity. There will only ever be one Abraham and one Moses. This is because there is only one of each of us. Hence, I am not meant to become Abraham or Moses. I am meant to become...me!²

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RESISTING SOCIAL MESSAGES

If all of my distinct aspects enable me to do what no one else can, I have to embrace my uniqueness. I have to own it. I have to dig deep to know what motivates me. Am I just trying to fit in because of my intense need to be accepted? Or worse, do I follow the crowd because I am worried of being laughed at for my differences? The vision of ourselves lies not in the society beyond but within the deepest recesses of our souls.

Our deep desire to be accepted by others takes on many guises and can even pose as a way of being unique. Take the infiltration of jeans into the former Soviet Union. Symbolizing the freedom of the Western world, jeans became a hot black-market item in Communist countries, as they represented the rebellious.³ Yet, in the name of that rebellion, everyone became the same. They *all* wanted to wear jeans. Many Soviet youths made their wardrobe choices thinking that they were being individuals, going against the grain of society, but in truth they were just following the crowd.

2 Based on the Vilna Gaon.

3 See Niall Ferguson, *Civilization*, pp. 240–50. On p. 249, he discusses why jeans were such a threat to the Soviet system.

I AM MY REALITY PLUS MY POTENTIAL

If we are to be true to ourselves, we need to get to know ourselves.⁴ And once we have met ourselves, we need to like what we see. But that is just the beginning. We need to also believe in our almost-endless capacity to become more than we can imagine. We must develop what the Kabbalists call *mochin d'gadlut*—"greatness of thinking"—an expanded consciousness.⁵ "God made the human upright," said the Kotzker Rebbe, "unlike the animal who walks on all fours. While the beast sees only the earth, man can also look up toward the heavens," i.e., toward a greater vision of himself.⁶

In fact, believing in ourselves is part of believing in God. I must believe that God wants *me* with my individual makeup, and He delights in

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me when I am true to myself, thus fulfilling His will.⁷ He is the "God of faith."⁸ Every person's creation was preceded with God's faith. God trusts us, and we must hence believe in ourselves.

In the *Modeh Ani* prayer, the first words a Jew says upon waking are:

*I thank you, O living and eternal King, for You have returned
my soul within me with compassion—abundant is Your
faithfulness.*

As each day dawns, God expresses his faith in us—that we will do good and are therefore worthy of getting our souls back. We are expected to similarly renew our faith in ourselves. Each one of us must believe that we are the person that God was waiting for.⁹

4 Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, vol. 1, Gate 3.

5 *Zohar*, Genesis 1:73.

6 Quoted by Menachem Posner, Chabad.org, based on *Kochav Hashachar*, by Simcha Raz.

7 Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen, *Tzidkat Hatzaddik*, p. 154.

8 *Sifri*, brought by Rabbi Michoel Ber Weissmandel.

9 Rabbi Michoel Ber Weissmandel, *Ish Hachamudot*, in the *Yiddische Velt*.

OUR PROFOUND INTERDEPENDENCE

Judaism believes that everyone has a double role to play in the world. We have to fulfill our individual potential—our personal *tikkun* (reparation). In addition, each of us has a unique contribution to make to the general *tikkun* that will bring the world to completion.¹⁰ This means that we are all interdependent in a profound way. I need you to fulfill your potential as much as you need me to fulfill mine. My responsibility to help you is an extension of my personal God-given mission.

MISSION IMPERATIVE

On Rosh Hashanah, God looks at “Man’s doings and [the] charge [placed in his hands].”¹¹ What does this mean? We are held accountable both for our deeds in general, as well as how we carried out our “charge”—our unique mission.

Moses’ encounter with God at the Burning Bush was a lesson for eternity on just this issue. God requested of Moses to approach Pharaoh and demand the Jews be freed from Egypt. Moses retort was “*Mi anochi*—Who am I?”¹²

Moses’ first concern was not his skill set, charisma, or status, or whether he had enough experience negotiating slave-releases.¹³ Moses was saying, “Who am I to be worthy of such a mission?”¹⁴ Fulfilling our mission is first and foremost a function of our own moral and spiritual worth. We need to “merit” success. But success itself should not be at the forefront of our calculation. We are to do what we can and then turn to God and say, “This is as far as I can go. The rest is up to you.” We are not ultimately in charge of the results, only the effort.¹⁵

10 *Ramchal, Daat Tevunot* 44.

11 מַעֲשֵׂה אִישׁ וּפְקָדוֹתָיו—Rosh Hashanah prayers.

12 Exodus 3:11.

13 Although some commentators do opine that it was just this that Moses meant when he said, “Who am I?”

14 *Bechor Shor*, Exodus 3:11.

15 *Ramchal, Mesilat Yesharim*, beg. of chap. 26.

But Moses had another concern: The Jewish People, the very ones I am trying to help, “will not believe me and they will not heed my voice.”¹⁶ I may believe in myself, but why should anybody else believe in me?

God’s response was astonishing.

As one of three signs, God instructed Moses to put his hand in his bosom and it emerged with a kind of skin disease called *tzaraat*.¹⁷ God told Moses to repeat the action, and his hand was cured.¹⁸ *Tzaraat* is the punishment for speaking negatively (*lashon hara*) about someone. God was showing Moses that he was being misled by his internal snake (God had turned Moses’ staff into a snake)—an external message of his internal state—which caused him not to trust his people.¹⁹ As people echo our trust, the reason the Jews might not believe him is because he did not believe in them. God later instructed Moses to write this incident in the Torah as an eternal lesson to us to believe in people.

Hidden in this message was another—that Moses’ personal growth would only be achieved when he engaged the Jewish People, when he turned his “me” into a “we.”

In essence, God’s response amounted to, “If you will believe in them, they will believe in you.”

Moses was not done. He claimed that he didn’t have the right personality and talent: “I am not a man of words...for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech.”²⁰ He wasn’t the articulate, charismatic leader type. Note that it is only at this stage that Moses makes this claim.

God answered him, “Who makes a mouth for man, or who makes one dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, God? So now go! I shall be with your mouth and teach you what you should say.”²¹ In fact, many great leaders were not charismatic. Believe in your cause, be courageous and humble, and people will follow.

16 Exodus 4:1.

17 Ibid., v. 6. *Tzaraat* is often incorrectly translated as leprosy.

18 Ibid., v. 7.

19 *Rashi*, Exodus 4:3, 6.

20 Ibid., v. 10.

21 Ibid., v. 11–12.

Moses tried one more argument. He suggested a better candidate. “Maybe I could do it. But my brother Aaron is more equipped than I am.”²² This solicits “the wrath of God.”²³ One cannot play God, pretending to know the potential and the mission of every person.

The Torah, known for its conciseness, describes Moses’ argument with such detail as a mirror of our own self-doubt. We don’t, of course have burning bushes to make things clear. But neither did Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who was a businessman until the age of forty, then became a Torah student until he was eighty, and only then was called Rabbi.²⁴ Rabbi Akiva hated rabbis when he was younger and only started studying (also) at forty.²⁵ Both became leaders of Torah in their generation.

*Just as a person
is obligated to
believe in God,
so one must then
believe in oneself.*

We cannot, as Jews once did, go to a prophet to find out our mission in life. But, often enough, it is clear what we are responsible for—be it ourselves, family, or society. How often do we shy away from responsibility because we doubt our worthiness, don’t think others will believe in us, feel that our resume is not up to snuff, or pinpoint someone better for the job? But the story of Moses shows us that none of us can escape our mission. If we can make a difference, we should feel the privilege of obligation.

WE NEVER HAVE TO GO IT ALONE

God assured Moses not only that He believed in him, but that “I will be with you.”²⁶ God stated, “I will be as I will be.”²⁷ This means, “I will be with you in future situations just as I am with you in this one.”²⁸ You need not play God. I will be there. Audrey Hepburn once stated, “Nothing is impossible; the word itself says ‘I’m possible!’” That statement only

22 Ibid., v. 13.

23 Ibid., v. 14.

24 Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 41a–b.

25 *Avot d’Rabi Natan*, chap. 11.

26 Exodus 3:12.

27 Ibid., v. 14. *Chizkuni* and others translate this as “I will be *because* I will be.”

28 *Rashi*, *ibid.*

makes sense when you know that you have God on your team. On our own, we are all too often too vulnerable and overwhelmed, or have too much baggage, or are pursuing the wrong things to begin with. He is, as we say in the first blessing of the silent prayer, our “helper, redeemer, and shield.” God will empower us when we are on the right track (our “helper”); save us when we are on the wrong one (our “redeemer”); and protect us from getting into situations that we are not capable of dealing with to begin with (our “shield”).