

Parashat Bereishit - Friday 21 October 2011

During the month of Elul we began the inner work of teshuva, of return. From Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur we deepened into it, and now at Simchat Torah, the journey of return becomes external. We come to the end of the Torah and go right back to the beginning, to read and study the very first portion, Bereishit, of the very first book, Bereishit. In the beginning.

Two stories from my own beginning. My father gave me my bar mitzvah present – on my 15th birthday. Just before I went off to college he grabbed a book from his bedside reading stack. “Maybe you’ll have better luck with this than I did,” he said, handing me a copy of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*. Given its delivery and my father’s history of gift giving, I was suspicious, but read it and have been reading it ever since. *I and Thou* has been my bible, the book I go back to for spiritual guidance, for getting back on track.

Martin Buber was born into an Orthodox family in Vienna in 1878. When he was four he was sent to Poland to live with his paternal grandparents, and his grandfather introduced Buber to the Hasidic teachings that infused his life, even after he abandoned religious practice. Best known for his retelling of

Hasidic stories, Buber studied Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. A multilingual religious philosopher, well-versed in Jewish and secular texts, Buber wrote *I and Thou* in 1922, and in 1925 he began working with Franz Rozenzweig to translate the Bible into German. A professor at the University of Frankfurt, Buber resigned in protest in 1933 when Hitler came to power, and in 1938 Buber and his wife moved to Palestine, where he joined the faculty at Hebrew University. For Buber, politics and spirituality were not separate, and when he died in Jerusalem in 1965, a delegation from the Arab Students Organization placed a wreath on his grave, to honor his commitment to dialogue.

I and Thou is Buber's most famous book, but like the work of Gertrude Stein, *I and Thou* is referenced far more than it's actually read, because Buber isn't easy to understand. For example, he begins the book by saying that the world for us is twofold in accordance with our twofold attitude, and this attitude is grounded in the two basic words we speak, I-Thou, and I-It. Even if that makes sense to you, how off-putting it sounds. German and many languages have two second person pronouns, one formal and one intimate. English used to have You and Thou, Thou the pronoun said to family, friends, lovers, and God. But for us, Thou is a leftover from

Shakespeare and the King James Bible, and the book's English title, *I and Thou*, gives it a formality and remoteness that's the opposite of Buber's message. *I and Thou* is an invitation to be more present with nature, with each other, and with that which some of us call God, so the most recent translation has kept the old title but talks about I-You rather than I-Thou.

Our experience of the world is twofold, Buber states, in accordance with our twofold attitude. Either we are living in a state of relationship, which he calls I-You, or living in a state of objectification, which he calls I-It. Either we encounter, dialogue, relate with nature, each other, and the Divine, or we use them, reduce them, commodify them. And while Buber clearly favors living in relation, he knows that we are human and will always be going back and forth between the two states, from relationship to objectification, from dialogue to disconnection. One harmonious, but a little bit cool. The other disjointed, but also the place where we learn and grow.

Buber speaks of two states of being, and Bereishit begins with two creation stories, one after the other. Biblical scholars tell us that the two stories come from two different authors, two different traditions, which we can hear in the text. The tone of each story is different, each story uses a different name for

God, and the order in which things are created is different in each story too. In the first story, plants are created, and then people are created – a man and a woman, equals, in the divine image. In the second story, plants are created after the first man is made by God from clay, and a subservient woman is only made later, from one of the man’s ribs. The first story is stately, luminous, elegant. The second story is a narrative of feelings and failings, as the very first human couple make a bad choice at the cafeteria in the primal garden, eating the wrong fruit and suffering from spiritual indigestion and their creator’s wrath. Now, a good editor could have easily made a few changes here and there so that the two stories flowed into each other without contradictions. But I’m glad the editor didn’t do that, glad the different sources remain, because they reveal something that Martin Buber illuminates for us.

We live in the world in two ways, in dialogue or with detachment. And for me, these two stories express that. In the first story, the days of creation unfold smoothly and the work of each day is said to be Good. It’s the story of Buber’s I-You world, of wholeness and connection. Then there’s the second story, the I-It story, the Adam and Eve story, in which the hope of

connection is shattered again and again, between people and God, people and nature, between our primal parents, and then between their sons.

Perhaps this has happened to you. You're sitting with someone. Someone you care about, or hardly know, or maybe even someone you just met, and the conversation is flowing and you're feeling deeply connected. Then, one of you says something – that shatters everything. You look at that other person as if it came from a whole other world, a world created different from the start. All at once, you've each gone from being a dear You to an alien It. The garden of mutuality is gone. You are instantly in exile from it. And yet, and yet, the hope of return remains, the hope of teshuva, of coming back, back to I-You, back to the very first story again.

This is the message of the high holidays, and of the sermons we heard. That there are ways to come back, to each other, to the world, and to that which some of us call God. You, we, I, take a deep breath. We remember that we are not only an It to other Its, not only made out of clay, but we are also called forth by God, in the image of God. And, if one or both of us doesn't shut down completely, or storm out of the room, the two of us may grapple, go back and forth, struggling to reconnect. And then, something shifts. One

of us says, “Ooh, I hear you. Oh, I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I said that. What I meant to say, what I want to say now, is…” And something opens up in us again. We can hear what the other person is saying, and then we are back in the first creation story, the story of dialogue and connection.

I get teary eyed when that happens. And sometimes it happens the other way. You’re sitting with someone you’ve never gotten along with, the great big It who always offends you. Then all at once It says something that makes sense to you, that you agree with. And suddenly, out of the blue – you’re face to face with someone you can relate to. And sure, a moment later, something comes out of its mouth that pushes another one of your buttons. Or I do that to you, push yours, and we fracture out of connection, back into I-Itness – talking about Palestine and Israel, about circumcision, about keeping the ark closed during the Aleinu, or about standing or not standing when we say kaddish. But if we can find a way to come back to being in I-Youness, there is a further blessing, according to Martin Buber. Since there is no separation in I-You, only connection, each time we encounter another You, a person, a tree, a pet, a place in nature, we are also connected to the ultimate You, to that which has been called God, the God of wholeness in

the first creation story, the Source of Life, the One we call out to in the Shema, the One from whom all beginnings flow.

Thirty years after he died, I can look back with tenderness at my It-Father, the man who grabbed and handed me the most important book anyone's ever given me. And I can sense him now, beneath his attitude. And I can feel now, below my anger at him. And I know now, that he understood me then in a way he did not know how to express – and that I probably would not have been able to hear, if he had. And he pulled Buber's book out from his bedside pile – because he knew that it was *for* me, and would become essential *to* me. And with that knowledge, I stop thinking of my father as It. I step into another story, and Dad becomes Thou again, You again.

I hope that in sharing some of Martin Buber's wisdom with you in this new year, that we will all find ways to stop, breathe, meditate, pray, remember to do whatever it is that each one of us has learned to do over time, that helps us to *teshuv* ourselves back to Youness from Itness, when we find ourselves there. Back to wholeness, back to dialogue, back to connection. Now, at the beginning of Shabbat, the day of wholeness, and here, at the Bereishit of Bereishit, the beginning of the beginning. Which is every moment.