

## **Yitro 2011 (5771): The Essence of Judaism**

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As many of you here know, Erica and I were recently blessed with the birth of twin daughters, who are less than two weeks old. We feel very grateful to God for granting us these precious gifts, which have enhanced our lives. In addition, I believe that this life-cycle event in our lives is what caused my eye to catch a piece just recently published by Donniel Hartman that a number of the Jewish and Israeli newspapers picked up from his website. While many of you here know who Donniel Hartman is, for those who don't, I will simply say that he is a prominent Jewish thinker, educator and leader in Israel whose opinions on Jewish life and the happenings in the Jewish State are taken very seriously by many Israelis and Diaspora Jews alike. The piece he wrote last week was entitled, "To My Dear Granddaughter" in which he publicly wrote his one week old granddaughter a letter sharing with her some wisdom on how to understand the gift of the Jewish heritage she has just inherited. Being that his granddaughter is only a week old, born only a few days after our twins, it is clear that in reality his message, at least for now, is really for us. And upon reading the first sentences, his letter drew me in.

He wrote, "We welcomed you to the world this week. With your birth something strange happened to me, which I did not experience with the birth of my children. As I looked at you I began to calculate how old **I** would be when you get married, or whether I would be alive to celebrate with you your children's bar or bat mitzvah."

In other words, in a moment of reflection, the birth of his granddaughter caused Hartman to look to the future. In doing so, he recognized the limitations of his own life-span and therefore the limitations of his influence on the world and his loved ones. This, I believe, reminded him of how important it is to pass on what we know, what we believe

in and what we cherish to our descendants, when we can, as soon as possible. Thus he wrote her the letter.

Yet, just as Donniel had a new and profound experience with the birth of a granddaughter, that was distinct from his experience of the birth of his own children, for myself, as a parent of two already, this most recent birth experience was different for me in many important and similar ways. First of all the obvious – this time there were two instead of one -- double the blessing and double the diapers. Second, this time around there were complications after birth that needed to be overcome. We are grateful that they turned out to be temporary, that they have resolved themselves quickly and that we have two healthy girls at home, cherished and blessed additions to our family. Yet, that whole experience gave us a renewed lesson about the fragility and sacredness of life. And finally, most relevant to Hartman's piece, this birth was also different for me in terms of my own perspective, my mental attitude, when they were born. Perhaps this is because, being a **somewhat** practiced father of young children (my oldest is only four) the typical care for a newborn this time around did not induce the same amount of stress and paranoia of whether I was doing things right; nor do the tasks I perform require the large amount of conscious brain power they used to in order to remember everything that needs to be done in a certain way for such tiny human beings. And perhaps this reality has freed part of my mind during this process to think beyond our new daughters' immediate needs. But whatever the reason, like Donniel, I have found myself looking at them and seeing the future -- imagining who they will become and articulating to myself the hopes I have for who they will be.

For all of these reasons the opening of Hartman's letter spoke to **me** in a powerful way, at this important juncture in my life. However, I believe the rest of his letter relates to us all and speaks generally to our hopes for a bright Jewish future and for how we can use the gift of our tradition to ensure it. As he wrote further, "You have been born into a great tradition and a great people. One of the challenges of a 3,500-year-old tradition is that with each generation it becomes increasingly weighty with details, laws, and ideas. In our tradition it is often difficult to identify the trees from the forest, to figure out what, within the seemingly endless myriad of traditions, is the core, the essence. Each generation obviously has to identify and answer this question for itself."

Here Hartman ponders a question that whether consciously, or unconsciously, we respond to daily by our actions in life – what is the core, or essence, of Judaism? What does it mean to me? In what way does Judaism play a role in my life each day, week, month or year? The answer we each give to this series of questions has considerable consequences: it will dictate what we end up passing on to the next generation, for we pass on what we value. It will dictate what we hold fast to and what we are willing to change or let go. It will help construct the story of what the Judaism of tomorrow will look like. Implicit in his words, as well, is the recognition that our tradition is necessarily dynamic and therefore it constantly needs tending and care for it to flourish into the future. How we engage in our Judaism today will help determine the status of Judaism tomorrow.

Although he doesn't make the connection himself, Donniel's question is a very timely one in relation to our Torah reading cycle. For this week's parsha is about the Revelation of God to the people, the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. In many ways,

therefore, our parsha too is about birth and beginnings; it is part of story of the dawn of our people and of our tradition. It relates to us the very first time that our ancestors encountered God as a community, for the Sinai moment was the enactment of our original covenant with God as a nation. And the sealing of our sacred agreement was completed by the recitation of the Ten **Commandments**, which can therefore be seen as the representation of the Jewish notion that relationships, with God and all of creation, are honored by how we **act** in life, not only by what we believe or profess.

As the chosen Ten to present at the revelatory moment, these commandments may be seen as emblematic to us, in many ways, as the core of Judaism and can help guide us to answer Hartman's questions. In other words, as the chosen representatives of the commandments in general, which we usually enumerate as 613, they beg us to study them to determine in what way they communicate Judaism's essence, in what way they can give us guidance as to how to live our lives and in what way they can help us to pass on such a powerful relationship with God from generation to generation.

Interestingly though, while Hartman does not mention the Ten Commandments in his letter, he quotes a famous **Rabbinic** source to communicate what he feels lies at the core of our tradition, instead. Yet, as I hope to show you, there is much in Hartman's selection of rabbinic wisdom that is a reflection of its Biblical roots, which can be found in our parshah. The connection between the Biblical and the Rabbinic here, actually demonstrate the dynamic continuity of the Jewish people through time, which is the secret to our success. We develop and grow but always remain connected to our source.

This is what Hartman says, "But there is one answer which was given 2,000 years ago by one of our great rabbis which has moved me throughout my life, and which I hope

will guide you [my granddaughter] as well. Hillel the Elder said, "What is hateful unto you, do not do unto others. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and study." Hartman continues, explaining his choice of quotation: "I love our tradition", he writes. "But very often it, like other religions, suffers from an autoimmune disease in which part of the tradition attacks itself and undermines its own goals and values. Religion is supposed to be a force for good, and a religious identity a foundation for greatness. Yet . . . In the name of God, and out of fidelity to the law, we often become blind to what is truly important. . . . Hillel tried to offer us some guidance through this maze. He said, let's get back to basics. First, to be a Jew is to recognize that you must treat others as you would want to be treated yourself. Moral failure is rarely the result of the rejection of moral principles, but rather the narrowing of their applicability. It's not that we don't **know** what the good is; we are **never** in doubt as to what we believe **others'** obligations are to **us**. The source of our failure is when we **anesthetize** our conscience through rationalizations which allow us to treat others **differently**. I pray that Hillel's teaching will always be your compass. While people are obviously different, and your responsibilities to them will vary, you will rarely go wrong if you treat them by the same standards that you, yourself, would so desire if the roles were reversed. [This value] is founded on the principle that all human beings are equal, for we are all created in the image of God."

When I speak to our *B'nei Mitzvah* the week before the *simchah*, as I did with Josh and Ethan this past week, I tell them that there is a great deal about God I do not understand. By definition, God is way too vast for any one limited person to completely comprehend. Yet, I tell them, there is **one** truth about God in which I very much believe.

Something I can almost say that I know for sure. And that is, that the concept of God, faith in God, means that we attest to the fact that there is more to life than ourselves, that we should care about the world beyond our small circle of existence. I believe that the notion that God is our eternal and universal creator means that we as individuals are not supreme, that no person is ethically or spiritually more important than another, that all people are equal. This belief, therefore, means that we have a duty to care about folks we don't even know, people who are not members of our family or our social group. As Hartman wrote, the level of obligation we have toward each person may vary depending on our relationship with them but the essence of the spiritual equality of human beings is essential to our tradition.

As some of you may know, traditionally, the Ten Commandments can be divided into two groups, those that primarily deal with obligations between us and God and those that primarily deal with obligations between us and our fellow human beings. Both are represented equally in the Decalogue, both categories are presented by God to the people at the covenantal moment at Sinai. Both categories are inexorably and spiritually linked. Consequently, a full engagement with Judaism cannot happen by pursuing only one. The two categories interact with each other constantly; they combine to form an integrated whole.

As I explained, it is our religious outlook as Jews, our theology and ritual framework, represented by the *mitzvot* between us and **God**, that speak to the equality of **human** beings and demand our action to aid our fellows in need. And it is through our actions in helping others, the *mitzvot* between us and our fellow **human beings**, that our relationship with **God** is honored and brought to life. Thus when the Ten

Commandments speak of one God, they are not only imparting to us an intellectual theological lesson. Rather, they are teaching us how to live our lives in holy manner so as to honor both God and all of God's creations. In many ways, this is the theological underpinning to Hillel's statement which Hartman endorsed. "What is hateful unto you, do not do unto others" -- because the Torah teaches that we are all equal and all of God's creations deserve the same treatment you expect for yourself.

As Hartman continues in his letter, and I quote, "The second part of Hillel's teaching is that this rule is the whole Torah. Now, Hillel knows this is not true. Judaism cannot be reduced to the ethical. A life of depth and greatness will inevitably contain spirituality, rituals, and culture. 'This is the whole Torah and the rest is commentary' is not a descriptive statement, but a prescriptive one, by which Hillel is teaching that in the end, all features of our tradition must comply with this basic rule."

I believe that he is saying that our religious life guides our ethical behaviors, just as our ethical norms inform our ritual practice. They are neither mutually exclusive nor sufficient on their own. Each holiday or ritual, for example, symbolizes a value: Yom Kippur, self improvement and humility, Passover, freedom, Hanukkah, heroism. These ritual celebrations, and our other customs, create a framework in our everyday lives for a life guided by values, directed by ethics and enhanced by a broader spiritual perspective. Our ancestor's moment at Sinai is emblematic of this essential understanding, we need the commandments that create a relationship with God to give us an eternal framework. Such commandments become the very source of our obligation to treat our fellow creations with the highest moral integrity and conduct. The two categories of mitzvot

were both present at Sinai and go hand in hand. To realize the full potential of Judaism we must engage in both.

The final phrase of Hillel's quote is also elucidating. "Go and study." About this Hartman writes to his granddaughter, "The obligation placed upon everyone to study is the great equalizer. . . The future of our religion and our people is going to belong to you. I hope to be there for a while, so that we can walk together. Once you figure out how to eat, and master a few other basic skills, I would like to invite you to help shape our people's future. Our tradition teaches us that it is not for you to complete the task; neither are you free to desist from it. We are all part of a multi-generational chain. Each one of us has a responsibility for our time, to make sure that our people and our tradition live up to the noblest and highest of standards. Even though you don't know this yet, your time has begun."

Our tradition teaches us that you and I, and every future generation, were all present at the Sinai moment of Revelation. While modern scientific and historical understandings may claim that this is impossible, such a notion reflects the axiomatic belief of our rabbis that our covenant with God, our responsibility for the Torah and our relationship with the Divine, are just as direct – just as intense – for us today as it was for our ancestors so long ago. In order for our tradition to flourish, the rabbis are teaching us, we must see it as our own, we must treasure it as the gift it truly is, and we must work to continue to give it life throughout the generations. As Hillel points out when he said, "Go and study" we do that through engagement, through learning and through practice. "Go", make the tradition a vital part of your life.

As I look into each of my own childrens' eyes, all still so young and, God willing, with much time before them, I now see the future. Not just their future, but the future of our tradition and the future of our world. More than ever I feel the responsibility of passing on my love for Judaism, for its core beliefs and for its beautiful details. For sooner than I am sure I will ever be prepared for, the time for that next generation to carry us forward will come. On the Shabbat of *Parshat Yitro*, the giving of the Torah from Mt. Sinai, I encourage us **all** to reflect on our appreciation for the gift of our tradition, in its entirety, in its beautiful integrated whole, that helps us draw closer to God and behave with righteousness towards our fellow creations, all at the same time. I ask us to consider how we will continue to pass this gift on to the successive generations: philanthropy, Jewish study, Jewish practice, Jewish education, volunteerism and ritual observance. On the day that we recall our ancestors' commitment to the covenant with God as well as the reception of the Torah, may we all renew our commitment to strengthening our people, our tradition, our connection to Torah, our support of Israel and to our mission of dedicating ourselves to the betterment of the world. Shabbat Shalom.