

A World Out There, A World in Here

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One of my teachers, Dr. Moshe Benovitz of Machon Schechter in Israel, remembers watching a movie – or mini-series – that followed the experiences of a group of friends during the 1960s. The end of the movie dealt with transition between the 60s and the 70s – a decade that would become known as the “me decade.” In a memorable scene, a woman tells her friend that she intends to change her life, leave the group, and live a quiet life alone in a small town. Her friend reminds her of the important work they’ve done together during their years of social and political activism, and all of the world’s problems that have yet to be solved – and she screams at her: “There’s a whole world out there!” To which the first woman replies, with her hand on her chest: “There’s a whole world in here!”

We most often think of Rosh Hashanah as the birthday of the world out there. This is based upon Rabbi Eliezer’s opinion (T.B. Rosh Hashanah 11a) according to which the world was created in Tishrei. But according to the rabbis – in Pesiqta deRav Kahana – Rosh Hashanah may not commemorate the first day of creation, but rather the sixth day, when God created human beings. Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of two worlds: a world out there, and a world in here.

Judaism places its faith in the world out there. When we accepted the Torah, we said, נעשה ונשמע “[First] we will do and [then] we will understand.” Abraham Joshua Heschel calls this Judaism’s “leap of action,” a leap that calls a person “to surpass his needs, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does.” We place our faith in deeds, believing that the road outside can lead to the world within us, or to an inner comprehension of God. Put another way, “Toch Shelo L’shma, Ba Lishma” – by going through a period of doing mitzvot during which we do not understand how they function as God’s will, we will come to a place of understanding God’s will.

But sometimes our method of teaching and learning – starting with action – makes us forget that the action is supposed to lead towards the world in here. The mystic poet Novalis said, “Inward goes the way full of mystery” –yet too often, Judaism’s emphasis on external actions ignores the mystery within every soul. In another place, Heschel wrote: “Too often, we immolate the individual on the altar of community.” We emphasize the communal enactment of rituals at the expense of individual experiences of God’s presence.

This High Holidays, I want to focus on Judaism and our emotions, our inner life, because **I am not satisfied with a vision of God that ignores how I feel at the expense of what I do.** On the High Holidays, we describe God as “בוהן כליות”

and “בוֹחֵן לִבְבוֹת” – God examines (from the modern Hebrew word “בְּחִינָה” meaning “a test” or “examination”) our insides – our kidneys and hearts that were the seat of our emotions. Are there emotions God wants me to feel? Or not to feel? Does God want me to feel happy or sad? Proud or ashamed? Angry or serene?

We lost a teacher this year, a good Jewish doctor. He was someone who believed that a soul is an endlessly beautiful thing and who taught us about the infinite complexity inside each human being: Oliver Sacks. “In examining disease, we gain wisdom about anatomy and physiology and biology,” he said. “In examining the person with disease, we gain wisdom about life.” Another year. Another Rosh Hashanah. Let us gain wisdom about the person within, and by doing so, gain wisdom about life.