

Sources for Reflection

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 37a

Man was created alone in order to teach you that if one destroys a single human life, Scripture sees him as if he destroyed the entire world; and if one saves a single human life, Scripture sees him as if he saved the entire world. In addition, [man was created alone] for the sake of peace among human creatures, that one might not say to his fellow, “My father was greater than yours”; and that heretics might not say, “There are many ruling powers in heaven.” Another reason: To proclaim the greatness of the Holy One. For if a man strikes many coins from one die, all the coins are exactly alike. But though the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, fashioned every man from the die of the first man, not a single one of them is exactly like his fellow. Hence, each and every person should say, “The world was created for me.”

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brakhot 58a

Our rabbis taught: He who sees hosts of Israelites should say, “Blessed be the Wise One of Secrets. Each person’s mind is not like the mind of any other, and each person’s face is not like the face of any other.” Ben Zoma once saw such a host on one of the steps of the Temple Mount. He said, “Blessed be the Wise One of Secrets, and blessed be He who has created all these people to serve me

Rebbe Simcha Bonim said to his Students:

Every person should have two pockets;
And he can use each when he needs it:
In one pocket is placed the statement, “The world was created for me.”
And in the other pocket: “I am dust and ashes.”

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Rosh ha-Shanah 18a

"On New Year's Day all the inhabitants of the world pass before him, *Ki-Bne Maron (like sheep)*." What does the Mishna mean by the words, "*Ki-Bne Maron*"? They translated these words as "Like sheep." Resh Lakish says they mean "as the steps of the Temple" (*i.e.*, narrow, so that people ascended them one by one). R. Yehudah, however, said in the name of Samuel: (They mean) "like the armies of the house of David."

Questions for Discussion

- 1) The Rabbis in Tractate Sanhedrin connect appreciating diversity and seeing the world as created for me. Why does one follow from the other?
- 2) What are the pros and cons of feeling that “The world was created for me” vs. feeling that “I am dust and ashes”? Why does Rebbe Simcha Bonim suggest that a balance between the two is necessary?
- 3) When in your life have you needed to remind yourself that “The world was created for me”? When have you needed to remind yourself that “I am dust and ashes”?
- 4) Is your uniqueness something you find within yourself or something others see in you?
- 5) As you look forward to the coming year, how can you better appreciate and share your own uniqueness? What unique gifts do you have that you could contribute to others more fully?

The Nesiya Institute – Rosh ha-Shanah Study Guide 5767/2006
The World was Created for Me

The Nesiya Commentary

How does our awareness of our own uniqueness affect our relationships with others? How can we build community while celebrating our differences? Is it possible to deepen our pursuit of uniqueness while strengthening our sense of belonging to a larger whole?

The liturgy and literature of Rosh ha-Shanah, the beginning of the new Jewish year, reflect the creative tension in Jewish tradition between embracing uniqueness and developing a sense of connection to and responsibility for the larger creation. According to Jewish tradition, Rosh Ha-Shanah marks the day on which God created humankind. The Rabbis ask in Tractate Sanhedrin: Why was man created alone, as singular and unique? One answer they provide suggests that God created man as singular and unique in order to foster appreciation and profound respect for every single human life. Scripture sees one who destroys a single human life as if he destroyed the entire world and, conversely, one who saves a single human life is viewed as having saved the entire world. The Rabbis also suggest that God created man alone in order to teach us to appreciate how the "King of Kings" makes each person different from every other. This appreciation can lead each person to say, "The world was created for me." I see each of God's creatures as offering me something unique; I feel grateful for a world full of amazing works and creatures, each one different from the other.

Appreciation of each person's uniqueness can be inspiring, on the one hand, and alienating, on the other. On the one hand, appreciation and gratitude can instill a desire to contribute to others, precisely because I may be able to contribute something that no one else can. On the other hand, the experience of one's own uniqueness can lead to a sense of alienation, estrangement, and a diminished sense of communal responsibility. In its most extreme form, we may come to see others not only as different but as less worthy.

The words of the 2nd century Rabbi Ben Zoma in Tractate Brachot reflect the challenges inherent in intense appreciation of one's own uniqueness. When facing the diverse multitudes on the Temple Mount, Ben Zoma praises God for "creating all these people to serve me." Ben Zoma's words, on the one hand, reflect the humility and gratitude of seeing oneself as an honored guest in God's world. On the other hand, this gratitude can be viewed as self-centered and failing to engender appreciation of or actions on behalf of others.

How can we embrace uniqueness in ways that inspire participation in and responsibility for a larger whole rather than alienating us from others? This challenge is especially relevant to teachers and students: How do we encourage individuality without inculcating selfishness? The words of the great Hasidic master, Rebbe Simcha Bonim, suggest we should live with the tension between two conflicting worldviews: "The world was created for me" and "I am dust and ashes." We must celebrate our greatness as creatures, uniquely created by God, and, at the same time, live intimately with an awareness of our own fragility and limitations.

The Mishna from Tractate Rosh HaShanah hints at an alternative approach. The passage, later quoted in the Rosh ha-Shanah liturgy, states that, "On Rosh ha-Shanah all the inhabitants of the world pass before Him like sheep." The Rabbis question why this passage uses the analogy of sheep, and provide two different explanations. Resh Lakish argues that on Rosh ha-Shanah we stand before God as if we are ascending the steps of the Temple, a narrow passageway where only one person can pass at once. Rabbi Yehudah, however, says in the name of Samuel, that we appear before God like the armies of the house of David. Whereas Resh Lakish suggests that we stand before God as unique individuals, Rabbi Yehudah pictures us passing before God as members of a larger whole. The two meanings of "Bnei Maron," taken together, challenge us to see ourselves as both unique individuals and humble members of a larger whole.

This struggle to embrace both uniqueness and community is particularly critical today. We live in a world that celebrates individualism, in which even Jewish identity is increasingly rooted in personal and spiritual growth, and decreasingly rooted in a sense of peoplehood and a shared national mission. Rosh ha-Shanah celebrates an alternative to contemporary cultural norms, challenging us to protect and nourish our sense of ourselves as unique and irreplaceable while also deepening our participation in a collective identity.