I and Thou: Thoughts for Parashat Bemidbar

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bemidbar

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When the Israelites were liberated from their slavery in Egypt, they did not—and could not—immediately become free people. Although the physical servitude had come to an end, psychological/emotional slavery continued to imbue their perception of life.

For generations, they had been viewed as objects, as lowly slaves whose existence was controlled by Egyptian taskmasters. Not only did the Egyptians see the Israelites as beasts of burden, but it was inevitable for the slaves to internalize this evaluation of their own lives. They were dehumanized…and it was very difficult to retain their humanity, self-respect, and dignity.

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the census of the Israelites in the wilderness. The Torah specifies that those who were to be counted in the census were to be identified by their names and by their families. This was a dramatic way of telling them: you have names, you have families, you are dignified human beings; you are not chattel, you are not nameless slaves, you are not objects. Until the Israelites came to internalize their freedom and self-worth, they would continue to see themselves as inferior and unworthy beings.

In his famous book, I and Thou, Martin Buber pointed out that human relationships, at their best, involve mutual knowledge and respect, treating self

and others as valuable human beings. An I-Thou relationship is based on understanding, sympathy, love. Its goal is to experience the “other” as a meaningful and valuable person. In contrast, an I-It relationship treats the “other” as an object to be manipulated, controlled, or exploited. If I-Thou relationships are based on mutuality, I-It relationships are based on the desire to gain functional benefit from the other.

Buber wrote: “When a culture is no longer centered in a living and continually renewed relational process, it freezes into the It-world, which is broken only intermittently by the eruptive, glowing deeds of solitary spirits.” As we dehumanize others, we also engage in the process of dehumanizing ourselves. We make our peace with living in an It-world, using others as things, and in turn being used by them for their purposes.

In critiquing modern life, Erich Fromm has noted that “We have become things and our neighbors have become things. The result is that we feel powerless and despise ourselves for our impotence.”

The line between I-Thou and I-It relationships is not always clear. Sometimes, people appear to be our friends, solicitous of our well-being; yet, their real goal is to manipulate us into buying their product, accepting their viewpoint, controlling us in various ways. Their goal isn’t mutual friendship and understanding; rather, they want to exert power and control, and they feign friendship as a tactic to achieve their goals.

Dehumanization is poisonous to proper human interactions and relationships. It is not only destructive to the victim, but equally or even more destructive to the one who does the dehumanizing. The dehumanizer ultimately dehumanizes himself/herself, and becomes blinded by egotism and power-grabbing at any cost. Such a person may appear “successful” based on superficial standards; but at root, such a person is an immense failure who has demeaned his/her humanity along with the humanity of his/her victims.

The Israelites, after their long and painful experience as slaves, needed to learn to value themselves and to value others; to engage in I-Thou relationships based on their own human dignity and the dignity of others. One of the messages of the census in the wilderness was: you are a dignified individual and your life matters—not just for what you can do as an “It” but for who you are as a “Thou.”

I-It relationships are based on functionality. Once the function no longer yields results, the relationship breaks. I-Thou relationships are based on human

understanding, loyalty and love. These relationships are the great joy of life.

I recently received an email with the following message: “Friendship isn’t about who you have known longest…it’s about who came and never left your side.”