Bridges, Not Walls: A Collection of Articles

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The following articles, spanning over 30 years, offer reflections on aspects of the theme, “Bridges, Not Walls.” They relate to issues of intellectual openness; interpersonal relationships; and human dignity.

Orthodoxy and Isolation

(This article was originally published in Moment Magazine, September 1980)

Gershom Scholem has described a mystic as one who struggles with all his might against a world with which he very much wants to be at peace. The tense inner dialectic, I think, is true not only of a mystic, but of every truly religious person.

A religious person devotes his life to ideals, values, and observances which generally are at odds with the society in which he lives. He fights with all his power to resist succumbing to the overwhelming non-religious forces around him. Yet, he does not want to live his life as a struggle. He wants to be at peace. He wants to be able to relax his guard, not always to feel under siege.

There are “religious” communities where the tensions of this dialectic are suppressed successfully. Within a tightly knit Hassidic community or in a “right-wing” Orthodox enclave, the positive forces of the community strongly repel the external pressures of the non-religious world. It is easier to create what Henry Feingold has called a “Pavlovian Jewish response”

within a vibrant and deeply committed religious colony. Religious observance is the norm; children learn from the earliest age what they should and should not do; outside influences are sealed out as much as possible. In such communities, the individual need not feel the incredible loneliness and pain of struggling by himself against society. His own society reinforces him. His own community—as a community—is relatively selfsufficient spiritually, and it is this entire community which withstands the outside world.

But the Modern Orthodox Jew feels the intensity of the dialectic struggle to the core of his existence. He is as Orthodox and as Jewishly committed as the Hassidim or as the “right-wing” Orthodox. He does not feel he is less religious because he does not have a beard, does not wear a black hat. No. The Orthodox Jew who is a college graduate, an intellectual, a professional, an open-minded person, can pray to God with a deep spirituality and can dedicate his life to fulfilling the words of God as revealed in the Torah.

Yet, because his eyes are open and because he is receptive to the intellectual and social life of the society around him, the enlightened Orthodox Jew finds it difficult to be at peace. He generally does not live in a community which helps him shut off external influences. He does not have a large reservoir of friends who share the depth of his religious commitment while at the same time sharing his openness to literature, philosophy, or science. He is at war with society, but wants to be at peace with society. Really, he is alone.

In “The Castle,” Kafka describes the predicament of Mr. K, a land surveyor. K comes to a place which is composed of two distinct entities: the Castle and the Village. K spends a good deal of time trying to make his way from the Village to the Castle but—in typical Kafkaesque style—he becomes lost in labyrinthine confusion. At one point, someone tells K; You are not of the Castle, you are not of the Village, you are nobody. K’s predicament is especially meaningful to an enlightened Orthodox Jew. He is neither a part of the Village nor the Castle. And often, he wonders if he, too, is nobody.

This is not metaphysics, not philosophy; it is the pragmatic reality for many thousands of devoted Jews in this country.

And in the most confusing situation of all we have the enlightened Orthodox rabbi. Not only is he busy with his own personal struggles, fighting his own wars, but he also is responsible for the struggles and battles of his community. Sometimes, his congregation may not even realize there is a war. Sometimes, he may appear to be a contemporary version of Don Quixote. Sometimes, he is perceived as being too religious and idealistic, and sometimes he is perceived as being crass, materialistic, secularist. For some people he is not modern enough, while for others he is a traitor to tradition.

Imagine for a moment the dilemma of an enlightened Orthodox rabbi. He is religiously educated and committed. He is trained in the humanities and the sciences. The Orthodox community on the "right," which scorns university education, looks upon this rabbi as a fake and imposter. The non-Orthodox community looks upon him as a religious reactionary who is trying to maintain ancient standards of kashruth, Shabbat, mikvah, and so many other laws in a society where these commandments seem almost meaningless. The right-wing Orthodox community condemns him for associating with non-Orthodox rabbis and with non-Orthodox Jews. And the non-Orthodox rabbis and non-Orthodox Jews may "respect" him from a distance, but they innately recognize that his is "not one of us."

When Moshe came down from Mount Sinai the second time, the Torah tells us that his face emitted strong beams of light. It was necessary for him to wear a mask to that people could look at him. One can imagine the terror of little children when they looked at the masked Moshe. One also can imagine the profound impact such a mask must have had on all the people of Israel. But we must also stop to think about how Moshe must have felt wearing such a mask, knowing that there was a strong, visible barrier separating him from his people. Who can know? Perhaps Moshe cried in misery and loneliness behind that mask.

While people to the right and people to the left will judge, condemn, patronize, "respect" the enlightened Orthodox rabbi, few people take the time to wonder what is going on behind his "mask." He also has ears, eyes, and senses. He knows what people are saying and thinking. He knows that his authenticity as a religious figure is challenged from the right and from the left. He knows that his ideals and visions for his community are far from realization, perhaps impossibly far. He knows that his best talents are not enough to bring his people to a promised land.

Imagine the quandary of an Orthodox rabbi who works with non-Orthodox rabbis in Jewish Federations or Boards of Rabbis. On the one hand, his open-mindedness compels him to be involved in communal Jewish affairs and to work for the good of the community with all interested people. Yet, it is possible that the Reform rabbi sitting next to him has eaten a ham sandwich for lunch, drives to the synagogue on Saturday, and has performed marriages that should not have been performed according to halakha. Is this Reform rabbi—whom he likes and respects as a human being—his friend and colleague? Or is this rabbi his archenemy, a person dedicated to teaching Judaism in a way that the Orthodox rabbi considers mistaken and even dangerous? And as this conflict nags at him, what is he to do with the voices of the right-wing who condemn him as a traitor for recognizing or legitimizing nonhalakhic clergy? And what is he to do with the voices of the non-Orthodox who condemn him for not being flexible and open enough on religious questions?

Or imagine another case. An enlightened Orthodox rabbi may recognize a variety of ways which could ameliorate the position of women in halakhic Judaism. His liberal education has made him receptive to a host of ideas, many of which can be implemented within the guidelines of tradition Jewish law. Yet, the “right-wing” Orthodox would condemn such ideas as basic violations of Jewish law and tradition. And at the same time, the non-Orthodox are fast to condemn the enlightened Orthodox rabbi for being too conservative and rigid.

He has the right ideas, but no medium of communication. He can speak, but he has few who will listen.

And yet another example. An enlightened Orthodox rabbi may recognize the need for compassion and understanding when dealing with the issue of conversion to Judaism. He may want to work within the halakha to encourage would-be converts to accept halakhic Judaism. He may reject the narrow and unnecessary stringencies advocated by colleagues on the right wing. And he will be roundly criticized and condemned by them. On the other hand, because he absolutely believes in Torah and halakha, he will require converts to undergo a rigorous program of study as well as circumcision and mikvah. Because of his standards, the non-Orthodox community views him as old-fashioned, unenlightened and even insensitive.

With all these tensions and conflicts, with all the voices to the right and to the left, the enlightened Orthodox rabbi tries to serve his God and his people in an honest and authentic way. It is very tempting to give up the battle. The internal pressures are sometimes too much to bear. But he cannot succumb to the temptation; he is the prisoner of his commitments and beliefs. Moshe, behind his mask, may indeed have been lonely and sad. But he never forgot who he was. In fact, he probably spent more time thinking about his condition when he wore the mask than when he did not. It is difficult to have a barrier between yourself and others. But perhaps a mask helps you to develop the courage and strength to stand alone in the battle against a world with which you want—with all your being—to be at peace.

Teaching the Wholeness of the Jewish People
(edited version)

(This article originally appeared in the magazine Ten Da'at, Heshvan 5749, Fall 1988.)

Our heritage is rich and vast, and we claim that we teach it. But do we truly understand the wholeness of the Jewish people, or is our knowledge really limited and fragmented? Do we—indeed can we—inculcate the concept of Jewish unity in our students? If we as educators are unaware of or disinterested in Jews who have had different historic experiences than we have had, how can we convey the richness of Judaism?

How can we, in fact, demonstrate the sheer wonder of halakhic Jewry without a sense of awe at the halakhic contributions of all our diverse communities throughout the world, throughout the ages? We may study the Talmud of Babylonia and Israel; the codes of sages in Spain; the commentaries of scholars of France, Germany, and Italy; the responsa of rabbis of Turkey, the Middle East, and North Africa; the novellae of sages of Eastern Europe; the traditions and customs of Jewish communities throughout the world. We study this diverse and rich literature and confront the phenomenon that all these Jewish sages and their communities operated with the identical assumptions—that God gave the Torah to the people of Israel, that halakha is our way of following God's ways.

As we contemplate the vast scope of the halakhic enterprise—and its essential unity—we begin to sense the wholeness of the Jewish people.

If, for example, we were to study only the contributions and history of the Jews of America, we would have a narrow view of Judaism. If we limited our Jewish sources only to a particular century or to a particular geographic location, we would be parochial. We would be experts in a segment of Jewish experience; but we would be ignorant of everything outside our narrow focus.

In order to teach the wholeness of the Jewish people, we need to have a broad knowledge and vision of the Jewish people. We cannot limit ourselves to sources only from Europe, just as we cannot limit ourselves to sources only from Asia or Africa. Often enough, however, Jewish education today fails to include in a serious way the Jewish experiences in Asia and Africa. How many educators can name ten great Jewish personalities who lived in Turkey, Morocco, or Syria during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries? How many Jewish Studies teachers have studied any works of authors who lived in Muslim lands over the past four to five centuries? And how many have taught this information to their students?

And have they learned?

There is a vital need to teach “whole-istic” Judaism, drawing on the great teachings of our people in all the lands and periods of their dispersion. To do this, we ourselves need to study, to think very seriously, to feel genuine excitement in gathering the exiles of our people into our minds and consciousnesses. When we are engaged in this process, we can help our students share the excitement with us. Jews who are “not like us,” whose families came from countries other than “ours,” should not be viewed as being exotic or quaint. There is more to a Jewish community than a set of interesting customs or folkways. We need to be able to speak of the Jews of Vilna and of Istanbul and of Berlin and of Tangiers with the same degree of naturalness, with no change in the inflection of our voices. We need to see Jews of all these—and all the other—communities as though they are part of “our” community.

Consider the standard Mikra’ot Gedolot, a common edition of the Bible. There are commenaries by Rashi (France); Ibn Ezra and Ramban (Spain); R. Hayyim ben Attar, the Ohr haHayyim (Morocco); R. Ovadia Seforno (Italy), and many others. The commentaries of the Talmud, the Rambam, and Shulhan Arukh are also a diverse group, stemming from different places and times. It is important for teachers to make their students aware of the backgrounds of the various commentators. In this relatively

simple way, students are introduced to the vastness of the Torah enterprise—and of the value of all communities that have engaged in maintaining the Torah. To quote Sephardic sages together with Ashkenazic sages, naturally and easily, is to achieve an important goal in the teaching of wholeness of the Jewish people.

Most teachers teach what they themselves have learned. They tend to draw heavily on the sources which their teachers valued. It is difficult and challenging to try to reach out into new sources, to gain knowledge and inspiration from Jewish communities which one originally had not considered to be one's own.

The majority of Jews living in Israel are of African and Asian backgrounds. Students who gain no knowledge of the history and culture of the Jews of Africa and Asia are being seriously deprived. They will be unable to grasp the cultural context of the majority of Jews in Israel, or they will trivialize it or think it exotic.

But if Jews are to be a whole people,
then all Jews need to understand, in a deep and serious way, about other Jews. This is not for "enrichment" programs or for special "Sephardic days;" this is basic Jewish teaching, basic Jewish learning.

I am saddened by the general narrowness I have seen in some schools. There is a reluctance to grasp the need for wholeness on a serious level. Time is too short. Teachers don't want more responsibilities. But Judaism goes far beyond the sources of Europe and America. Giving lip service to the beauty of Sephardic culture; or singing a Yemenite tune with the school choir; or explaining a custom now and then—these "token lessons" don't represent a genuine openness, a positive education.

Standard textbooks don't teach much about the Jews of Africa and Asia, their vast cultural and spiritual achievements, their contributions to Jewish life and to Torah scholarship. Schools often do not make the effort to incorporate serious study of these topics, so our children grow up with a fragmented Jewish education.

To raise awareness and sensitivity, teachers should utilize the resources within the community—including students, community members, and synagogues representing diverse backgrounds, customs, and history that can enlighten students. Spending Shabbat with diverse

communities, within the United States as well as when visiting Israel, can be a moving way of sharing cultures and customs.

Attaining wholeness in Jewish education entails considerable work on the part of administrators, teachers, and students. It may cost time and money. But can we really afford to continue to deprive our children and our people of wholeness?

Eulogy at Wounded Knee

(Originally delivered in May 1992 at the Wounded Knee Memorial in South Dakota.)

W e stand at the mass grave of men, women and children—Indians who were massacred at Wounded Knee in the bitter winter of 1890. Pondering the tragedy which occurred at Wounded Knee fills the heart with crying and with silence.

The great Sioux holy man, Black Elk, was still a child when he saw the dead bodies of his people strewn throughout this area. As an old man, he reflected on what he had seen: “I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream. For the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.”

Indeed, the massacre at Wounded Knee was the culmination of decades of destruction and transformation for the American Indian. The decades of suffering somehow are encapsulated and symbolized by the tragedy at Wounded Knee. Well-armed American soldiers slaughtered freezing, almost defenseless, Indians—including women and children. Many of the soldiers were awarded medals of honor for their heroism, as if there could be any heroism in wiping out helpless people.

How did this tragedy happen? How was it possible for the soldiers—who no doubt thought of themselves as good men—to participate in a deed of such savagery? How was it possible that the United States government awarded medals of honor to so many of the soldiers?

The answer is found in one word: dehumanization. For the Americans, the Indians were not people at all, only wild savages. It was no different killing Indians than killing buffaloes or wild dogs. If an American general taught that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian,” it means that he did not view Indians as human beings.

When you look a person in the eye and see him as a person, you simply can’t kill him or hurt him. Human sympathy and compassion will be aroused. Doesn’t he have feelings like you? Doesn’t he love, fear, cry, laugh? Doesn’t he want to protect his loved ones?

The tragedy of Wounded Knee is a tragedy of the American Indians. But it is also more than that. It is a profound tragedy of humanity. It is the tragedy of dehumanization. It is the tragedy that recurs again and again, and that is still with us today. Isn’t our society still riddled with hatred, where groups are hated because of their religion, race, national origin? Don’t we still experience the pervasive depersonalization process where people are made into objects, robbed of their essential human dignity? When Black Elk spoke, he lamented the broken hoop of his nation.

The hoop was the symbol of wholeness, togetherness, harmony. Black Elk cried that the hoop of his nation had been broken at Wounded Knee. But we might also add that the hoop of American life was also broken by the hatred and prejudice exemplified by Wounded Knee. And the hoop of our nation continues to be torn apart by the hatred that festers in our society.

Our task, the task of every American, is to do our share to mend the hoop, to repair the breaches.

The poet Stephen Vincent Benet, in his profound empathy, wrote: “Bury my heart at Wounded Knee.” This phrase reflects the pathos of this place and the tragedy of this place.

But if we are to be faithful to Black Elk’s vision, we must add: Revitalize our hearts at Wounded Knee. Awaken our hearts to the depths of this human tragedy. Let us devote our revitalized hearts toward mending the hoop of America, the hoop of all humanity That hoop is made of love; that hoop depends on respect for each other, for human dignity. We cry at this mass grave at Wounded Knee. We cry for the victims. We cry for the recurrent pattern of hatred and dehumanization that

continues to separate people, that continues to foster hatred and violence and murder.

Let us put the hoop of our nation back in order. For the sake of those who have suffered and for the sake of those who are suffering, let us put the hoop of our nation back in order.

Orthodoxy and Diversity

(This article originally appeared in Liber Amicurum, in honor of Rabbi Dr. Nathan T. Lopes Cardozo, Jerusalem, 2006.)

The Talmud (Berakhot 58a) teaches that one is required to recite a special blessing when witnessing a vast throng of Jews, praising the Almighty who is hakham haRazim, the One who understands the root and inner thoughts of each individual. “Their thoughts are not alike and their appearance is not alike.” The Creator made each person as a unique being. God expected and wanted diversity of thought, and we bless God for having created this diversity among us.

The antithesis of this ideal is represented by the evil city of Sodom. Rabbinic teaching has it that the Sodomites placed visitors in a bed. If the person was too short, he was stretched until he fit the bed. If he was too tall, his legs were cut off so that he fit the bed. This parable is not, I think, merely referring to the desire for physical uniformity; the people of Sodom wanted everyone to fit the same pattern, to think alike, to conform to the mores of the Sodomites. They fostered and enforced conformity in an extreme way.

Respect for individuality and diversity is a sine qua non of healthy human life. We each have unique talents and insights, and we need the spiritual climate that allows us to grow, to be creative, to contribute to humanity’s treasury of ideas and knowledge.

Societies struggle to find a balance between individual freedom and communal standards of conduct. The Torah, while granting much freedom, also provides boundaries beyond which the individual may not trespass. When freedom becomes license, it can unsettle society. On the other hand, when authoritarianism quashes individual freedom, the dignity and sanctity of the individual are violated. I wish to focus on this latter tendency as it relates to contemporary Orthodox Jewish life.

Some years ago, I visited a great Torah luminary in Israel, Rabbi Haim David Halevy. He had given a shiur (Torah lecture) for rabbis and rabbinical judges in which he suggested introducing civil marriage in the State of Israel. He offered cogent arguments in support of this view, and many of those present actually thanked him for having the courage to put this issue on the rabbinic agenda. His suggestion, though, was vehemently opposed by the rabbinic establishment, and he was sharply criticized in the media. Efforts were made to isolate him and limit his influence as much as possible. Students of the rabbi were told not to attend his classes any longer. This rabbi lamented to me: “Have you heard of the mafia? Well, we have a rabbinic mafia here.” This, of course, is an indictment of the greatest seriousness. It is not an issue of whether or not one favors civil marriage. The issue is whether a rabbinic scholar has the right and responsibility to explore and discuss unpopular ideas. If his suggestions are valid, they should be accepted. If they are incorrect, they should be refuted. But to apply crude pressure to silence open discussion is dangerous, and inimical to the best interests of the Torah community.

Similar cases abound where pressure has been brought to bear on rabbis and scholars who espouse views not in conformity with the prevailing opinions of an inner circle of Orthodox rabbinic leaders. As one example of this phenomenon, a certain rabbi permitted women to study Talmud in his class at his synagogue. One of the women in his congregation consulted a Rosh Yeshiva who promptly branded the synagogue rabbi as a heretic (apikores) for having allowed women to study Talmud. The Rosh Yeshiva told the woman she was not permitted to pray in the synagogue as long as that rabbi was there. When the synagogue rabbi was informed of this, he wrote a respectful letter to the Rosh Yeshiva and explained the halakhic basis for women studying Talmud. The Rosh Yeshiva refused to answer, and told the woman congregant that he would not enter into a correspondence with a heretic. The woman stopped attending the rabbi’s synagogue.

Is this the way of Torah, whose ways are the ways of pleasantness? Does this kind of behavior shed honor on Orthodoxy? Shouldn’t learned people be able to speak with each other, argue a point of halakha, disagree with each other? Shouldn’t the Torah world be able to deal with controversy without engaging in name-calling and delegitimation?

Over the years, I have been involved in the planning of a number of rabbinic conferences and conventions. Invariably questions are raised

concerning who will be invited to speak. Some say: If Rabbi so-and-so is put on the program, then certain other rabbis and speakers will refuse to participate. Some say: If such-and-such a group is among the sponsors of the conference, the other groups will boycott the event. What is happening in such instances is a subtle—and not so subtle—process of coercion. Decisions are being made as to which Orthodox individuals and groups are “acceptable” and which are not.

This process is insidious and is unhealthy for Orthodoxy. It deprives us of meaningful discussion and debate. It intimidates people from taking independent or original positions for fear of being ostracized or isolated. Many times I have heard intelligent people say: I believe thus-and-so but I can’t say so openly for fear of being attacked by the “right.” I support such-and-such proposal, but can’t put my name in public support for fear of being reviled or discredited by this group or that group.

We must face this problem squarely and candidly: The narrowing of horizons is a reality within contemporary Orthodoxy. The fear to dissent from “acceptable” positions is palpable. But if individuals are not allowed to think independently, if they may not ask questions and raise alternatives—then we as a community suffer a loss of vitality and dynamism. Fear and timidity become our hallmark.

This situation contrasts with the way a vibrant Torah community should function. Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein, in the introduction to Hoshen Misphat of his Arukh haShulhan, notes that difference of opinion among our sages constitutes the glory of Torah. “The entire Torah is called a song (shira), and the glory of a song is when the voices differ one from the other. This is the essence of its pleasantness.”

Debates and disagreements have long been an accepted and valued part of the Jewish tradition. The Rama (see Shulhan Arukh, Y.D. 242:2,3) notes that it is even permissible for a student to dissent from his rabbi’s ruling if he has proofs and arguments to uphold his opinion. Rabbi Hayyim Palachi, the great halakhic authority of nineteenth-century Izmir, wrote that the Torah gave permission to each person to express his opinion according to his understanding. . . . It is not good for a sage to withhold his words out of deference to the sages who preceded him if he finds in their words a clear contradiction. . . . A sage who wishes to write his proofs against the kings and giants of Torah should not withhold his words nor suppress his prophecy, but should give his analysis as he has been guided by Heaven. (Hikekei

Lev, O.H. 6; and Y.D. 42)

The great twentieth-century sage, Rabbi Haim David Halevi, ruled:
Not only does a judge have the right to rule against his rabbis; he also has an obligation to do so [if he believes their decision to be incorrect and he has strong proofs to support his own position]. If the decision of those greater than he does not seem right to him, and he is not comfortable following it, and yet he follows that decision [in deference to their authority], then it is almost certain that he has rendered a false judgment. (Aseh Lekha Rav, 2:61)

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, in rejecting an opinion of Rabbi Shelomo Kluger, wrote that “one must love truth more than anything” (Iggrot Moshe, Y. D., 3:88).

Orthodoxy needs to foster the love of truth. It must be alive to different intellectual currents and receptive to open discussion. How do we, as a Modern Orthodox community, combat the tendency toward blind authoritarianism and obscurantism?

First, we must stand up and be counted on the side of freedom of expression. We, as a community, must give encouragement to all who have legitimate opinions to share. We must not tolerate intolerance. We must not yield to the tactics of coercion and intimidation.

Our schools and institutions must foster legitimate diversity within Orthodoxy. We must insist on intellectual openness, and resist efforts to impose conformity. We will not be fitted into the bed of Sodom. We must give communal support to diversity within the halakhic framework, so that people will not feel intimidated to say things publicly or sign their names to public documents.

Let me add another dimension to the topic of diversity within Orthodoxy. Too often, Orthodox schools and books ignore the teachings and traditions of Jews of non-Ashkenazic backgrounds. Information is presented as though Jews of Turkey, the Balkans, North Africa, and the Middle East simply did not exist. Little or no effort is made to draw from the vast wellsprings of knowledge and inspiration maintained by these communities for many centuries. Yet, these communities—deeply steeped in tradition—produced many rabbis and many books, rich folklore, and religious customs; and these spiritual treasures belong to

all Jews. To ignore the experience and teachings of these communities is to deprive ourselves and our children of a valuable part of the Jewish heritage.

Why, then, isn't there a concerted effort to be inclusive in the teaching of Jewish tradition? Among the reasons are: narrowness of scope, a tendency toward conformity, lack of interest in reaching beyond the familiar. However, unless we overcome these handicaps, we rob Orthodoxy of vitality and strength, creativity and breadth.

Orthodoxy is large enough and great enough to include the Rambam and the Ari; the Baal Shem Tov and the Gaon of Vilna; Rabbi Eliyau Benamozegh and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch; Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Rabbi Benzion Uziel; Dona Gracia Nasi and Sarah Schnirer. We draw on the wisdom and inspiration of men and women spanning the generations, from communities throughout the world. The wide variety of Orthodox models deepens our own religiosity and understanding, thereby giving us a living, dynamic, intellectually alive way of life.

If the Modern Orthodox community does not have the will or courage to foster diversity, then who will? And if we do not do it now, we are missing a unique challenge of our generation.

Retaining Our Humanity

(Originally published as an Angel for Shabbat column on Parashat Shemot, January 9, 2010.)

"And he turned this way and that way,
and saw that there was no man."

When Moses saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite slave, he looked around before striking the Egyptian down. This passage is usually understood to mean that he wanted to be sure that he would not be seen when he slew the Egyptian.

The passage might be understood in a different way. Moses was outraged by the entire system of slavery. He saw one group of people oppressing another group of people, treating the slaves as chattel rather than as fellow human beings. By dehumanizing the Israelites, the Egyptians felt no remorse in beating them, forcing them to do backbreaking work, condemning

their children to death. The taskmasters had lost their humanity.

The abusive treatment of slaves exacted a psychological as well as physical price; the slaves came to see themselves as inferiors to their masters; they lost self-respect along with their freedom.

When Moses was confronted with a specific instance of an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, he realized that “there was no man”—the oppressor had become a savage beast, the oppressed had become a work animal. The human element had vanished; there was no mercy, no mutual respect, no sympathy for each other. It was this recognition that was more than Moses could bear. He rashly killed the Egyptian—which did not solve the problem at all. He was then compelled to flee for his own life. He stayed for many years in the tranquility of Midian, working as a lonely shepherd. He could not deal with the injustices taking place in Egypt—a land where “there was no man,” a land where people had been reduced to animal status, to objects rather than subjects.

The Torah’s story of the redemption of the Israelite slaves is ultimately a profound lesson teaching that each human being has a right to be free, to be a dignified human being, to be treated (and to treat others) as a fellow human being. Slavery is an evil both for the oppressor and the oppressed. It is a violation of the sanctity of human life.

Dehumanization of others leads not just to disdain, or even to slavery; it leads to violence and murder. Dehumanization is how terrorists justify murder: They see their victims as inferior beings, as infidels—not as fellow human beings created in the image of God. Dehumanization results in discrimination against those who are perceived to be “the other”—people of different ethnicity, religion, race, beliefs.

We know our society is in trouble when members of one group feel themselves innately superior to people of another group, and engage in stereotyping and dehumanizing them. We know that there is moral decay within the Jewish people, when Jews of one background feel themselves superior to Jews of another background, when they exhibit discriminatory behavior and language, when they dehumanize their fellow Jews and fellow human beings.

When human beings treat each other as objects, humanity suffers. When human beings see their kinship with other human beings and treat

each other with respect, humanity begins its process of redemption. We can retain our own humanity only when we recognize the humanity of each of our fellow human beings

I and Thou

(Originally published as an Angel for Shabbat column for Parashat Bemidbar, May 11, 2013.)

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, selfrespect, 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 or her humanity along with the humanity of his or 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 this: 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.”