



*Parshat Bereshit*  
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**Rosie's Paradox**  
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz  
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

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Can we ever really understand another person? Your colleague at work, your fellow student in the classroom, the person you sit next to in shul, your soccer teammate, your dance partner, your fellow actor on stage, your own beloved family members—do we ever really understand what makes another person tick?

One person who gave a lot of thought to this question is Richard Thaler, who won the Nobel Prize this week because of his essential contribution that real human beings are messy and complicated when it comes to their financial decisions.

For example, Thaler asked people who were standing on a hot beach how much they would pay for a cold beer? Would they pay the same price for a beer that was bought at a convenience store as they would for a beer purchased from an upscale hotel? If human beings were perfectly rational actors, a beer is worth whatever a beer is worth, regardless of where it is purchased. But, as our member Roger Lowenstein pointed out this week in an article on Thaler published in the Washington Post, Thaler found that real people would pay 3 dollars for a beer purchased at a convenience store, but would pay 7 dollars for a beer purchased at a fancy hotel near the beach. Why? Because human beings don't conform to the model of rational actors. We are complicated.

Consider a second example of Thaler's work highlighted by Roger. You bought an opera ticket for \$100, but when you get to the opera house you realize you have lost the ticket. Question: Do you go to the ticket counter and buy another ticket for \$100. That rational answer

is yes. You value the opera at \$100, which is why you bought the first ticket for that amount. The fact that you lost that ticket is a sunk cost. The rational actor would buy a second ticket for \$100. But Thaler showed that many real people would not buy another ticket, thinking that \$200 is too much.

It is striking that Thaler won his Nobel Prize for pointing out that real human beings are more complicated than the model of a perfectly rational actor the very week that we read *Bereishit* and are first introduced to the Torah's teaching about the nature of mankind. In his commentary on Bereishit, Rabbi Shai Held asks the question: what does the Torah tell us about human nature?

The Jewish view is neither that human beings are inherently good nor that we are inherently bad. The Jewish view is that human beings are inherently complicated, pulled in many directions at once, capable of breathtaking kindness as well as horrific cruelty and staggering indifference. (p. 6)

Rabbi Held points out that it is the exact same person, Cain, who both invents murder and invents cities, the same person who destroys and who builds.

Richard Thaler tells us that we make irrational economic decisions.

The Torah tells us that we make irrational life decisions. Every human being contains multitudes, love and its opposite, caring and its opposite, kindness and its opposite, decency and its opposite, all wrapped up in our messy humanity.

Which makes understanding one another a challenge. Sometimes we are mysteries even to the people we love most.

I recently heard an NPR segment on *This American Life* about a nine year old girl named Rosie who was being raised by her single Dad, a man named Matt Salyer, a professor of writing at West Point. Rosie was at that phase where she was asking lots of questions. She was asking questions while her Dad was trying to work. He says to her Rosie, why don't you just write

down your questions. If you give me a list of questions, I'll answer them. Rosie writes a list of 50 questions, single-spaced, hand-written.

A lot of her questions were the deepest questions of life. Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? How does time work? Do we make worlds? Do we become like God?

Her father takes this list of 50 questions, closes the door to his study, and starts doing heavy duty research and writing. For example, he worked hardest on his answer to her question about time. The NPR reporter, Stephanie Foo, observes that his answer on the nature of time quotes Camus, brings in the Millennium Falcon, then Saint Augustine, then Kierkegaard. And by the way, Rosie was nine. The reporter asks the father a rhetorical question. I am an adult. I cannot understand what you are saying. How would you ever expect your nine year old daughter to understand what you are saying?

When the NPR reporter interviews her, she discovers that Rosie was feeling vulnerable and lonely when she wrote her questions. Her grandfather, whom she had been very close to, had recently died. Just as her grandfather died, her living arrangements changed. She went from living with her mother to living with her father. She also started a new school, where she felt either ignored or bullied. When she got home that day, the day she started writing her questions, she decided she needed somebody to talk to. And that person would be her father. But he was pulled in a lot of directions that day. He was grading a ton of West Point papers that day. He did not see his daughter's pain that day. No villains, just busy people. That was the day he said, write down your questions, and I'll answer them. He said that to buy some time so that he could get through his assignments. She wrote down her fifty questions with the hope and expectation that they would prompt face to face conversations.

When he got around to tacking his daughter's questions, their complexity sent him to the library to research Camus, not to the kitchen table where he could actually talk to his daughter.

Here you have a father and a daughter. They love one another. They take one another seriously. And yet, despite being of the same flesh and blood, despite living under the same roof, they still do not get one another.

What do we do about our complexity that makes getting one another, even those closest to us, so hard? The NPR segment is called Rosie's Paradox. What do we do about the paradox that our very complexity sometimes makes us inaccessible to the people to whom we are supposed to be closest? I think three lessons flow.

First, be aware of the challenge, alive to it, intentional about it. In every setting, from your own kitchen table, to your own bedroom, to your office, to your school, to your shul, to any space near and dear to your heart, understanding the other human beings who are there, what they want, how that connects with what you want, how you might have to work together to accomplish what you both want, takes work.

Second, be humble. People walk around with backstories that are so important to them that we do not know. This past week I was at a social event for Sukkot in our shul. There was a gathering of some 20 to 25 adults all seated around a table that happened to have had one empty chair. I invited people who wished to share to come on up, and put your hands on the empty chair, and introduce the group to somebody who you love, who is not here physically, but whom you would want us to know about. Somebody not here, but here in your heart. Person after person came up and, with voices crackling with emotion, spoke of fathers and mothers and children and friends whom they loved and lost, or loved and are estranged from. Seeing this intensity, right below the surface, at a lovely social gathering, reinforced that people walk around

with complicated backstories of loss and yearning. If we want to understand another person, we need to be humble enough to know what we do not know.

Third, it never hurts to ask the other person what they are looking for, and is what you are doing at the moment helpful. Rosie asked her Dad one question that sent him to the library for the longest time. It was his longest answer, and as of the date the segment aired, it was still not completed. Her question was: what is love? The reporter asked Rosie: what did you mean? What did you want? Rosie, now 12, three years later, the question still not answered, said this to the reporter:

I had no idea that he was doing all these things, and it was just a big surprise for me. If I could, I would definitely just say, forget the questions. I just wanna talk...Just hang out.

Rosie's Paradox. She asked these questions just to talk to her Dad. But the questions that were intended to generate more time with her Dad generated less time. The question about love created more distance. The father and daughter needed an NPR reporter to help them sort all this out.

Rosie's Paradox is not limited to Rosie. Rosie's Paradox is all of our paradox.

We are complicated. But all of our complexity also creates an opportunity. Rosie and her Dad had an NPR reporter. If we are alive to the challenge, we can be our own NPR reporter.

If somebody in our life has a need, a dream, a yearning, that we are not seeing yet, we can ask them about it; we can listen to them; we can learn from them; we can be better at connecting with them. With a little humility, a little curiosity, a little openness, people who were so close, and yet so far away, can be so close, once again. We can meet them where they live. That is the gift of this time of year. That is the gift of beginning again. It is a dance that takes work, and it is a dance that never ends. Shabbat shalom.