



***Parshat Behar***  
**May 25, 2019 — 20 Iyar 5779**  
**The Real You**  
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One day a fifth grader gets sent home from school for taking another student's pencil. When he gets home, his father says why in the world would you take another student's pencil? We don't steal in this family. Your mother and I have taught you better values than that. We expect more from you than that. From now on, if you need a pencil, just tell me. I'll bring them home from the office!

This story is told by Dan Ariely, an Israeli, and a professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University who wrote a book with an evocative title: The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves.

Ariely argues that there is a creative tension within everyone of us. On the one hand, we want to be decent, honest human beings. We want to be mensches. That's the father who wants to teach his child not to steal.

On the other hand, it is human nature to want more, which can lead us to get close to the line or to cross the line. When we cross the line, we rationalize our decisions in order to justify them. That's the father taking pencils home from work.

This creative tension between who we want to be and who we sometimes are plays itself out in interesting ways. For example, Ariely has studied how often diners at a restaurant eat their meal and try to slink off without paying. His answer is almost never. He has talked to many restaurant owners, and they report slinking without paying does not happen.

At the same time, however, many people illegally download intellectual property. Ariely points out that his own books have been illegally downloaded thousands of times. People who

would not steal a restaurant meal would and do steal intellectual property on-line. How can that be?

What is the difference between these two cases? The answer is people. In the restaurant case, there are people around. The maître de. The waiter. The chefs. Fellow diners. In the downloading case, there are no other people around. It is just you and your computer. Yes, there are people who are affected by illegal downloads, the owners of that intellectual property. But because you cannot see them, it is easier to rationalize it away.

People bring out the best in people. In his classic poem *Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman observed that each of us contains multitudes. There are moments when we feel resilient; moments when we feel broken. Moments when we have great clarity; moments when things are not so clear. Moments when we have conviction; moments when we don't know what we believe. Moments when we believe everything will be just fine and moments when we are not so sure.

If there is all this fluidity, if we each contain multitudes, what do we need? We need friends, family and community, people who bring out *our* best, and people whom we can help bring out *their* best.

I was talking to Micah Goodman this week about this reality of each of us containing multitudes, and he directed me to a psalm, psalm 22, that I had never paid attention to before. It is a particularly compelling psalm to me because it is about the inner life of a preacher, both before the sermon, when the preacher is backstage, and during the sermon, when the preacher is onstage. Before the sermon, backstage, the preacher is filled with doubt—so much doubt that the psalmist's words are the words that Jesus utters when he is on the cross: *eili eili lamah azavtani*, My God, my God, why have You abandoned me. *Elohai ekrah yomam v'loh taaneh*. My God, I

cry by day, and You do not answer me. But when this preacher gets onstage, he tells a different story:

Because of You Lord I offer praise in the great congregation...  
Let all who seek the Lord praise Him.  
Always be of good cheer!  
Let all the ends of the earth pay heed and turn to the Lord...  
for kingship is the Lord's  
and He rules the nations. (22:26-28)

Which version is the real deal? The backstage preacher of doubt, or the onstage preacher of faith?

Micah answered this question by telling me a story told to him by a good friend from Israel who had worked for then President Clinton in the 1990s. One day President Clinton was giving a deposition, answering questions under oath for several hours about certain intimate and embarrassing matters. At the end of the deposition, according to Micah's friend who was there, President Clinton was in a foul mood. He was drained and angry. He was not fit for company. There was only one problem. He was scheduled to be the speaker at some event that very night. This friend of Micah's was in the presidential limousine after the deposition and sees that the President is in no shape to give a speech. This friend calls a person at the event and says let's reschedule. The President cannot speak tonight. The person at the event says: we can't reschedule. There are thousands of people here, and they are expecting to see the President. He has to show up.

So they go to the event, and this friend of Micah's wonders: how is this going to play out? The President is drained and angry. How is going to summon energy to speak to thousands of people? And then he describes what happened. The President gets on stage, the crowd is very large, very warm, very supportive. They cheer for the President. And the President's color

comes back to his face, his anger begins to dissipate, his charm game comes back, and, feeding off the energy of the crowd, he gives an energetic speech that wows the crowd.

Which was the real preacher: the backstage preacher of doubt or the on stage preacher of faith? Which was the real President: the angry man in the limousine, or the charming man on the stage?

Micah's answer is yes. They are all real. President Clinton in the limousine *was* drained and angry, but the crowd brought him back. He became a different self. The preacher off stage *was* feeling abandoned, but the crowd brought him back. He became a different self.

There is no one real you. There are multiple real yous. That's what it means to contain multitudes. The real you that emerges at any particular moment hinges on people. What you do the people in your life bring out?

People bring out the best in people. It was people who gave the preacher back his faith. It was people who gave the president back his charm.

Which raises the question: What do *we* bring out in people? What do *we* bring out in our friends, in our family, in our communities?

Many of us followed the story of commencement speaker Robert Smith announcing at the Morehouse College graduation that he was pledging to pay off all of the graduates' student loans, a gift that would cost him \$40 million dollars. His message to the Morehouse graduates was: without this financial burden weighing you down, go out now and do a world of good. That is the story that got the press.

But there is a backstory that did not get as much press. Why did he do it, and why did he do it when he did it? Why at commencement? The backstory was that when *he* was graduating from Columbia Business School in 1994, he had been planning on a marketing career. But on

the day of his commencement, he sat down with his commencement speaker, a man named John Utendahl, and John Utendahl changed his life by encouraging him to go into investment banking, which he did and which worked out very well for him. That commencement day intervention brought out the best version of Robert Smith—or at least the version of Robert Smith that Robert Smith likes best. And now, on commencement day, he wanted to pay it forward, doing the same for a whole class of graduating seniors.

Somebody saw Robert Smith. And because somebody saw him, that changed his life. He is now choosing to see other people, the graduating seniors of Morehouse College, in a way that can change theirs.

Everyone contains multitudes. Everyone contains nobler angels and less noble angels, raging demons and soaring possibilities, *depending on the people in their lives*. That creates an opportunity for impact.

We may not be able to pay off an entire graduating class's student debt, but everyone here can change somebody else's life for the better.

Whose loving attention changed *your* life?

And whose life will never be the same because you see them now? Shabbat shalom.