

Collective and Individual Identity
Parshat Kee Tavo and Parshat Nitsavim
Melton Geshar at Shearith Israel, September 19, 2011
JSI at Akiba Academy, September 20, 2011

- A) Sefer Devarim chapter 29, verses 9 – 14
- 1) Seeing contradiction between verses 9 – 10 and verses 13 – 14: If all are there, who is not there?
 - 2) Answer: Future generations
 - 3) Midrash Tanchuma (Warsaw) Parshat Nitavim, section 3
“I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone” - Rather, even the future generations were there at that time ... the souls were there even though their bodies were not yet created.
 - 4) This midrash may be taken literally as a metaphysical statement, or it may be read figuratively, that future generations are considered as if included in potencia in the earlier generations.
 - 5) Just as the oral law when fleshed out is considered to have already been within the written Torah in potencia, so are future generations already there within prior generations.
 - 6) This is part and parcel of collective identity, which is a function of how people see themselves within society, and how society sees them. Traditional societies are based upon social solidarity, which is the fabric of identity.
 - 7) All identity moves on a continuum between the individual and the collective, and the Torah is founded upon a strong emphasis upon the collective. People see themselves and are always encouraged to see themselves, as part and parcel of something much bigger than themselves. This is the foundation of their self understanding, and the source for the meaning of their lives.
 - 8) Collective identity is both horizontal and vertical.
 - a) Horizontal – I am an integral part of my generation
 - b) Vertical – I am an integral part of those who gave birth to me and of those who descend from me.
 - 9) Collective identity is not any more or less intuitive than individual identity.
 - a) In ancient times, people’s experiences within the same tribe or ethnic group even over time were much more similar than today.
 - b) I may be much similar to a very close friend who is the same age and does the same thing as I do, etc, than I am to the 4th grader who bore my name and social security number 45 years ago. So the modern definition of identity is not simply a matter of facts.
 - 10) Just like decisions made by an 18 year old can still obligate him when he is 80, so in a society founded upon collective identity, decisions made by former generations can obligate later generations.
- B) The centrality of recapturing a sense of collective identity is a desideratum for modern Jews and modern Judaism. One must see his or her self as part of an ongoing chain of tradition, etc. This is extremely difficult because we live in an age which is founded on exactly the opposite premise.
- C) Deuteronomy chapter 26, verses 1 – 11
- 1) This refers to some time in the future, when you are established in the land, and finally plough and plant and harvest.
 - a) Verse 3 – ‘at that time’
 - b) Verse 4 – ‘this day’

- 2) This personal success is to be seen in the larger national and historical context
 - a) Verse 3 – ‘I have entered the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to assign us’
 - (i) He may have been born there, but he experiences as his own experience the entrance into the land of earlier generations
 - (ii) The original divine promise was not to them but to us
 - 3) To thank God for the produce he must go back and retrace the history that brought him into the Land. Tens or even hundreds of generations are conflated into the continuous present
 - a) We begin without a land
 - b) We were then enslaved
 - c) God redeemed us from slavery
 - d) God brought us into this land
 - e) Therefore was I able to bring forth these crops
 - 4) The pronouns are in the first person plural: ‘Us’ and ‘we’ and not ‘I’
- D) The central commandment of Pesach- telling and experiencing the story
- 1) Exodus chapter 13, verse 8
 - 2) Mishnat Pesachim, chapter 10, mishna 5
In each generation one must see himself as if he personally went out of Egypt, as it says "and thou shall tell thy son in that day saying it is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt" (Exodus 13:8)
 - 3) Hagadah of Pesach, the four sons
The wicked one, what does he say? "What is this service to you?!" He says 'to you,' but not to him! By thus excluding himself from the community he has denied the fundamental point. You, therefore, blunt his teeth and say to him: "It is because of this that the Lord did for me when I left Egypt"; 'for me' - but not for him! If he had been there, he would not have been redeemed!"
 - 4) Mishnat Pesachim, chapter 10, mishna 4
According to the child's understanding the father teaches him: He begins with disgrace and ends with exaltation and he expounds from 'My father was a fugitive Aramean' until he finishes the whole passage.
 - a) This passage is short and therefore cannot be merely read; it must be expounded upon which makes it personal
 - b) It is of course in the first person plural
- E) Contrast between the recitation of the first fruits declaration and the events of the Pesach seder
- 1) The first fruits is a personal experience which is to be tied in to the larger community
 - 2) The exodus is a communal experience which is to be tied back to the individual
 - 3) These are the two challenges of collective identity: On the one hand to make Jewish history and Jewish communities around the world relevant and meaningful to ourselves and our children, to make it ours; and to take our lives and the events will live through and to see them as part of the larger Jewish vision.
- F) Study of Torah
- 1) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot page 63b
Rebbi Yehudah spoke further in honour of the Torah, expounding the text, Silence! Hear, O Israel: Today you have become the people of the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 27:9) Now was it on that day that the Torah was given to

- Israel? Was not that day the end of the forty years [of the wandering]? It is, however, to teach thee that the Torah is as beloved every day to those that study it as on the day when it was given from Mount Sinai.
- 2) This is like the first fruits: Connecting our personal biographies back to the big picture
 - 3) Standing while listening to the reading of the Torah in synagogue, and the holiday of Shavuot – this is like Pesach, trying to tie the collective event back to us.
- G) Deuteronomy chapter 26, verses 12 – 15
- 1) The commandment is to declare, just like we found with the first fruits, but our sages categorized and related to these two declarations very differently
 - a) Mishnat Sota chapter 7, mishna 1
The following are said in any language ... the confession of tithes
 - b) Mishnat Sota chapter 7, mishna 2
The following are said only in Hebrew ... the declaration of the first fruits
 - 2) The matter of the tithes the sages understood to be a fundamentally personal and individual matter, and they therefore called it a confession and allowed it in any language. There is no need here to expand the boundaries of personal identity and to include a larger purview. Linkage to the larger community is most certainly demanded by the text of the first fruits and therefore the sages called it a declaration and they legislated that it be read only in Hebrew and not in the language that the individual knows best.
- H) Ideally, our identities ought to balance the collective and the individual
- 1) Individuality provides creativity, release from the bondage to the mistakes and superstitions of the past, freedom, discovery, understanding, progress, affluence
 - 2) Collectivity provides social stability, rootedness, social cohesion, meaning, purpose, connectivity, self sacrifice
 - 3) The two great ages of mankind before our own era were ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy, but they both were short lived because their success contained the seeds of their downfall.
 - a) Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy
What had happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy. Traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seen to be associated with superstition; the liberation from fetters made individuals energetic and creative, producing a rare florescence of genius; but the anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilized than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion.
[See: <http://standpointmag.co.uk/node/4049/full>]
 - 4) Jewish tradition always balances these two poles, so that we don't stay mired in the Dark Ages and on the other hand so that we don't so the seeds of our own demise in our forward move towards progress.
 - a) The structure of the Jewish calendar is a prime example: Two cycles, two sets of holidays, two new years
 - (i) Pesach, Shavuot Succot – the particular and the collective
 - (ii) Rosh haShana, Yom Kipur, Succot – the universal and the individual

See Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Covenant and Conversation, Ekev, 2011
Rabbi Dov Linzer, Weekly Parsha, Kee Tavo, Sept, 16-17, 2011