

***“You and Y’all”***

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**One of my criticisms of the latest Reform prayerbook, *Mishkan Tefilah*, is its use of the “vertical pronoun.” There are too many interpretative selections of the traditional prayers that contain the word “I”, or the alternative, “me.” For those of you who take note of such things, it’s virtually never found in any siddur of any of Judaism’s branches. As a matter of fact, it was such an omission that what we know as the “silent prayer” was added so that the individual in the pew, you and I, had the opportunity to insert our**

personal petitions and the deepest feelings within us into our worship experience. Even if we didn't have the need to step aside from the content of the prayerbook to contemplate our own longings, the set prayer for the "silent prayer" contains the "vertical pronoun," either "I" or "me": "*Keep my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile.*" That's it...all the rest of the prayers are in the plural..."we" or "us."

It's as if the tradition is telling us, "*You know, it's not all about you,*" something we hear more and more in this world of ours that focuses too much

on the individual. And you know what? That's precisely what the tradition was telling us in the construction of the prayerbook!

But it goes deeper than that. Read the Torah from beginning to end and you'll find that for all intents and purposes you and I don't count much, a fact of the ancient world in general. It was the community that mattered. In the very first verse of *Re'eh*, the sedra for this Shabbat, we find that subtly presently to us.

Before I specify, let me say that I and probably most, if not all, of you, are thrilled that except for

our English classes in high school and college, we didn't have to learn the language as do those who are immigrants from lands where English is not spoken. Just to quickly make the point, once you master the Hebrew alphabet, it's a really easy language to learn in comparison to English. For example, you hear Hebrew and you know if something is in the singular or plural, whereas in English everything is just about *y'all*. There's one word for "*You, Charlie*"; there's one word for "*You guys*." And that word is "You," the same word, a bit confusing at times.

So back to *Re'eh*. "*See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse.*" In Hebrew grammar, the word "*Re'eh*" is singular, and we immediately figure that what follows is something directed to the individual. Not so, because *lifneichem*, the "you" in the phrase "*set before you*" is in the plural...or better stated in the King's English, "*set before y'all*".

Why the inconsistency? Who knows, it might have been an editor's mistake, but that doubtful. In any case the commentators had a field day because they just loved to find twists like this; and

**in this particular case they made a most interesting and most important point that was true in their day and true in our day as well. That is, each individual is encouraged to think long and hard about how she or he will respond to community obligations. When an Israelite went astray it was the community that bore the brunt along with the sinner. You cannot have a cohesive body that will survive when challenged by the stronger nations *if each person is an island* unto him or herself. Know that what you do impacts everybody.**

The Torah might – and does – imply this time and again, but even more forceful will be found in what's coming up in just a few weeks, that is the *Al Chet* prayer of the High Holydays. While you yourself might not have acted in a way some might feel is sinful, the list of *averot* that are found in the liturgy is a heck of a long list. The assumption is, well, if you didn't sin this way maybe you sinned that way, but in a sense that is irrelevant; the bottom line is *kol Yisrael arevim zeh la-zeh*, "All of Israel, each one of us, is responsible one for the other." We carry the *nachas*, the pride, of our

**neighbor's accomplishments...but we carry as well the burden of our neighbor's indiscretions. When a member of the tribe makes the headlines for a scientific discovery, or if we learn that she or he has performed an unusual act of kindness that is shared near and far, we are thrilled and proud. But when we hear about the dastardly acts of Bernie Madoff we as a people cringe though we're not related to him, and we never even met him.**

**Let's make that a little less ominous though in doing so we move to the present, to our own congregation. Just as the strength of the Israelites**



**was rooted in the whole, so is the strength of this congregation. And right now, while we care deeply for all our People wherever they might be, each one of us as individuals must put a little more effort in caring for Beth El and its future.**

**We are the individuals but this congregation is the community. Look at what it has meant to you over the decades of its vital presence in your lives. I have heard groups of you share the vitality of yesterday and the sorrows of today. I have spoken to this one and that one and hear the same story, some with tears in their eyes.**

***“Re’eh, See Joe Lefkowitz, Jane Schleplowitz, I have set before you, y’all, all of you...Who? The congregation of Temple Beth El,” and while I did not mention what follows when I initially introduced this *sedra* to you, let me do so now....”See, I have set before you *ha’bracha*, *v’hak’lala*, the blessing and the curse.” Whatever those blessings and curses may be in the Torah text, for us it is the blessing of a vision of yesteryear and the curse of division today; it is the blessing of a golden vision of tomorrow with no***

**curse to keep us from moving forward with  
purpose, with joy, with togetherness.**