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Seeking Understanding, Living With Mystery

For about fifteen years I have been a fan of a show on television called “Inside the Actors' Studio.” Each show is an interview of an actor, by an intense and inquisitive host named James Lipton. The interviews take place before an audience of students training to become actors, writers, and directors. I wouldn't say that I personally see an extraordinary number of movies or plays. What invariably captures my interest is the point when an actor tries to explain the process by which she, or he, takes on a role. How an actor prepares to represent another person, a character who may have lived or who was fashioned in the imagination of a writer. The pace of the conversation slows, and the actor struggles to articulate an answer. This is the essential thing that a good actor does, and yet it is so hard to talk about – to take on the reality of another person.

Many of the actors who have been interviewed find themselves talking about the process in ways that are almost mystical. There is a kind of discovery, a mystery. Even for some of the “method actors”, who start with mannerisms and actions, rather than motivations and inner truth.

The Actors Studio interviews fascinate me, because as a series, they form an extended exploration on the basic question of how one person comes to really *understand* another person.

We always say that understanding each other is at the heart of all relationships and interactions. We say that to reduce or solve conflicts, we should see things from the other's point of view. We know we should try harder to listen to a spouse or partner when things are tense, to open up to another way of seeing the life we build and share together. Even breakthroughs in international relations are supposed to become easier when leaders allow themselves to hear and understand the grievances of an enemy or an opponent. It's an ethic that has always resonated with me, as a rabbi and teacher, son of a physician and a social worker.

In a similar vein, the most challenging Jewish teachings about tzedakah suggest that giving is a practice that begins as a situation of separation and difference, and progresses toward, in the words of *Vayikra*, “your brother's life is with you.” The Talmud challenges us to identify another person's need as he himself experiences it, even if *I myself* wouldn't think of this as much of a need.

How much can we expect to understand another person? How she thinks, feels, sees the world? What gets in the way of that? What are the obstacles, and how would we overcome them?

There are times when it seems like strangers hear us in a way that people who know us don't. How many of us have ended up next to a stranger unexpectedly for hours, on a train or a grounded airplane, opening up about the most interesting and maybe intimate facets of our lives? Why do we do this? Maybe strangers don't make snap judgments, or any at all. They don't try to understand in any deep way.

It feels good to tell our story to someone who hasn't heard it all before; we're intrigued by the fresh reaction. Sometimes you're fortunate enough to come to a new workplace, and a coworker thanks you for a favor and tells you what a kind person you, a good listener. Here is someone who didn't raise you or fall in love with you, who has never seen you over dinner or with your kids – and still comes to the same judgment. It's confirming, and affirming. We might have stopped believing the good stuff about ourselves, until a stranger reminds us that the “official story”, the one others tell or we tell ourselves, is actually true.

It's the same thing too when we talk about our lives and our dilemmas with therapists, counselors, physicians, attorneys, or seek advice from teachers or professional mentors who aren't on the scene. Sometimes we need a person at some distance, to offer us a better understanding of ourselves.

But for the most part, we want understanding in our lives as we live them, from our family and friends. What does it take to get there?

Many of you know the actor Anna Devereaux Smith, who played the National Security Advisor on “The West Wing” – Dr. Nancy McNally. Her reputation as an actor and playwright, though, rests on a series of one-woman performances. In 1991 she created “Fires in the Mirror”, about the violence in Crown Heights, between Jews and blacks. She did a show in 1994 called “Twilight: Los Angeles”, about the Rodney King beating and the subsequent riots. She's done a couple of other shows in this vein as well, portraying hundreds of characters in the process.

Ms. Smith creates her shows in an unusual way that's actually very straightforward. She tape-records people involved in the events or the theme she is working on. Famous people – Rodney King himself; Daryl Gates, the infamous police chief. The man in the street – Lubavitch relative in Brooklyn, Korean shopkeeper, crack addict, beat reporter. She picks these people and persuades them to be interviewed. Afterward, she uses the tapes to learn exactly what each person said, and how they said it. Not how she as an actor might interpret it, but every pause, every “um”. If a phone rang during the interview, a phone ring would happen at the exact same point in the monologue on the stage.

This is method-acting to the extreme. But Anna Deveare Smith says this: “There is a moment when most people can talk and they say something that nobody else can say. They didn't hear it on the news, or read it in the paper, and it is gorgeous.”

What gets in the way of this kind of understanding? Anna Deveare Smith says that what got her started on this method of playwrighting was actually watching late night TV talk shows. Once she watched Johnny Carson trying to get Sophia Loren to tell jokes, while she was in the middle of telling a serious story. Ms. Smith says: “I was interested in what appeared to be a tug of war between what the guests wanted to reveal about themselves and what the host seemed to want them to reveal.”

In the midrash, Yom Kippur is understood as the anniversary of forgiveness after the crisis in the Torah of the Golden Calf, the *egel hazahav*. This was the earliest violation of the Second Commandment, which forbids us to put in one form something which was revealed, but cannot be represented. By the Talmud's calculation, Yom Kippur was the day Moshe came down with the second set of tablets, and the relationship and covenant between God and the people of Israel was reestablished.

The upshot of this tradition is that making and worshipping the Calf represents the quintessential sin, the paradigm of the wrongs we need to correct at this time of year. So what is an idol? In relationship terms, what does it mean to build and worship an idol?

An idol is a denial of mystery. A substitution of what's familiar for what's unfamiliar. Unable to live in the presence of a mysterious God, the people make a visible one, and direct their dances and sacrifices to this easier thing. Perhaps the revelation forty days before, which touched all their senses, set their expectations too high. They felt that closeness would always be there, that whatever there was to see and understand about the One would always be apparent, if they looked. And they were alarmed when every day wasn't a day of revelation – when in place of the magic, there was only mystery.

We too can be frightened by the mystery of other people, especially when we aren't sure how to fully understand our children, our spouses, our partners, our good friends. The longer we live together, the longer our friendships, the more our relationships have endured, the more we are supposed to know each other. We should understand more. And we do, generally. But there are still times when we feel walled off by the skin that surrounds us, the boundary between one person and another.

Sometimes we become trapped in one particular, familiar way of looking at a person in our life. There are many variations. *L'chaf z'chut* – in a positive vein, when we bring someone new into our life, we might overfocus on the qualities we like or admire – patience, humor, passion, fun, wisdom – and, we might construct an ideal, or an idol out of them. We are happy, or understanding, when we see those qualities in action, those qualities we know in that person. We're frustrated or distant when we don't see them. We look more insistently for what we're expecting, for the quality that seems lost, upset that it's missing rather than wondering, “Why didn't he understand like I thought he would?”

When we become frustrated with someone, we come up with a story that explains the person, and see everything new through that lens. Social psychologists have long observed that when I don't act the way I usually do, I attribute it to the situation, but if it's another person, that's just how you are. So, he didn't ask me how *my* work is – well, he's always been self-centered. I wouldn't ask *her* to help – she wasn't there last time, she's never there for anyone. I'm guessing the scenario is common toward our more difficult coworkers and bosses. It's heartbreaking when it happens in families.

Professor Yochanan Muffs at the Jewish Theological Seminary once said that the gold of the calf is “frozen fire.” When we freeze one story about a person, we not only close doors to understanding. We also deny that person the possibility of changing, even for the good. In place of a dancing flame, like the burning bush with its changing shapes and colors, we see something single, simple, solid – but opaque. One of the Talmud's terms for an idolator is *oved kochavim u'mazalot* – one who worships the stars and constellations, in other words a believer in astrology, someone who thinks our destinies are already determined and cannot change.

Idolatry, as a relationship idea, isn't about making negative judgments. The philosopher Will Herberg says that idolatry is taking one important thing, and making it the absolute. It's when we hold up a single interpretation of another person and make that the absolute truth, a way to understand everything about that person. Our ancestors thought that a gleaming gold statue riding in front of them in battle would lead them easily to the promised land – they forget that there was more to God than their leader in battle.

So too, we often understand people less well when we hold up some single, key fact about them, and use that to interpret everything else. She had drug problems; he could never commit; you never knew where you stood with her. The more attached we are to a single or a repetitive way of viewing a friend, a spouse, a child, more we look to be confirmed in that view. Doubting that another person can change, we lose the chance to help in her healing or her *teshuvah*.

In fact, sometimes the surprise of someone changing for the better throws us for a loop. We don't like to admit it, but we get attached even to our negative images of other people. It throws us for a loop when someone unexpectedly apologizes, before we have the chance to drag it out of them. We have to give up the image, the idol we have built.

One of my models is a terrific writer about early childhood education, a teacher and researcher named Vivian Gussin Paley. Her books are like Anna Deveare Smith's shows. They flow from her close observations of the nursery school and kindergarten students she has taught. She also uses a tape recorder. She doesn't look at the child in terms of the adult understanding he is working toward. Instead, she wants to know exactly what 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds say when they talk, play, argue, and write stories. This is really hard to do without a tape-recorder and notebook. The way Vivian Paley does it is to suspend her own judgment, to listen with a questioning mind, rather than being impatient to teach the kids a preconceived point.

Vivian Paley would come to a new class with a lot of information about the kids. Many of them have been poor, or children of color, and she herself is white and Jewish and middle-class. But she writes that unless a parent would come to talk, she would wouldn't pay attention to that other information, to anything other than the words she heard or the things she saw in front of her.

In one of her books, Vivian Paley writes, "It is the *not* knowing about characters that makes them interesting." Sometimes, when we are puzzled by the person in our lives we think we knew everything about, the best thing to do might be to live in the not-knowing. Sometimes, when we're struggling to get a bead on someone, we could stop, and try simply to see and notice, and appreciate, just by observing, like Anna Deveare Smith or Vivian Paley.

I remember when Alex was little, there would be evenings when I would look at him and wonder what planet he was from, as I would try to get him to settle down or sleep. And from time to time I would, in desperation, sit next to him before he went to bed, and start talking to him just the way he would talk, with his own particular patterns of inflection and waves of his hand. I remember how intrigued he was. He'd quiet down and look at me, and sometimes, instead of responding talking back in his own way, he would try to imitate me. Two people, not fully understanding, but just seeing who's the other person there.

“It is the *not* knowing about characters that makes them interesting.” Understanding another person isn't a problem solved once, and then it's done. What makes us fascinating to each other is not only the enduring core, but the ways we change and grow. That's part of the mystery, and sometimes it's unsettling. And sometimes people do change for the worse. But most of the time, in our important relationships, those changes should be an opportunity to explore new dimensions.

Toward the end of the Golden Calf story, Moshe asks God if he can see God's glory, God's physical presence. The answer, of course, is no. Instead, God hides Moshe in a cleft of rock, and as God passes by, Moshe hears the *shlosh-esreh middot*, the Thirteen Dimensions of God's compassion that we have been repeating today, over and over. The lesson is that when we let go of trying for certainty, of trying to understand everything about each other – when we unburden ourselves of the impossible quest for a complete revelation – we allow ourselves to be forgiving, to let another person change. And we should realize that the people who love us can't always see our own glory or mystery. They can't always read your mind or your thoughts. We don't, after all, completely know ourselves. When we get this, we'll find it easier to be generous with forgiveness, when misunderstandings occur.

After the Golden Calf, after forgiveness, Moshe sets out to build a more subtle symbol: the *Aron*, the ark. In ancient times, it contained both sets of tablets, broken and whole – a reminder of partial understanding. It's the model for our *Aron Kodesh*, the ark we have been facing throughout our prayers of this season, and every Shabbat. Sometimes open, often closed. When we see it open, it can remind us of the ways we can understand each other better – by hearing each other's words when we are being open. And when we see the ark closed, we are reminded to be humble about our ability to understand every last thing about other people. To respect each other's mystery, confident that in due time, the ark will open again.