

Could we be better?

Berieshit 5782

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Six school boys are shipwrecked on an island. With no food or water, they have to figure out how to survive and function out there in the middle of the sea, with no hope on the horizon, no rescue forthcoming for months, maybe even years to come. So the question becomes: what happens next?

I immediately thought about William Golding's tale: the Lord of the Flies. Without the thin veneer of civilization, the boys eventually break down into ruthless monsters. But as Rutger Bregman chronicles in his quest to uncover the "real Lord of the Flies," in his book "Humanity, a Hopeful History," Golding's narrative couldn't be further from the truth in this case. In 1965, six boys borrowed a boat, and were shipwrecked on the Island of Ata in the Pacific ocean. It was rarely easy. But they quickly created a system to survive and thrive. If a fight broke out it didn't end in bloodshed, rather a self imposed time out. They began and ended their days with song and prayer, and when they were finally rescued: they were healthy and mostly happy.¹

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<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/09/the-real-lord-of-the-flies-what-happened-when-six-boys-were-shipwrecked-for-15-months>

Much of Western culture is built on the premise that human beings are inherently selfish, and need to be constrained.

Philosopher Thomas Hobbes proposes the Veneer Theory: that civilization is just a thin layer protecting us from tearing each other to shreds. But what if we weren't as terrible as the news tells us we are? What if each and every one of us at our core had the capacity to be kinder, and together we could create a kinder more just society? What would it take to accomplish something of that magnitude? You wouldn't believe it's possible if you turned on the news, which consistently highlights the worst in humankind, and human nature is a point of concern from the very beginning.

The Rabbis read our Parashah, Bereishit, and they are drawn to an oddity in the language: Let us create humanity in our image. (genesis 1:26). Why the first person plural, they wonder? There is only one God after all. One answer is that they imagine a conversation between God and the angels.

'God asks: "Do you agree that we should make humanity in our image?" They replied, "Sovereign of the Universe, what will be their deeds?"

God showed them the history of mankind. The angels replied, "What is humanity that You are mindful of them?" [in other words, let man not be created]...Ignoring the angels, God created humanity anyway. And each time we falter, the angels accuse God of making a mistake

in creating human beings. And each time, God replies: (Isaiah 46:4), “Even to old age I will not change, and even to grey hair, I will still be patient.”²

Even if we struggle to believe in ourselves, individually and collectively, even if we struggle to believe in God, God believes in us. While we may struggle to have faith in God, God places faith in us to be better, to be kinder, and to overcome our worst impulses. This creates two challenges for us in our lives: first is to believe this about ourselves. That we have that ability to be kinder, more compassionate and more thoughtful. That is the easy part. The harder part is to believe that about other people. That the person you’ve never met, has that same capacity to be a nice caring human, and our tradition argues that we all have that within us. Unfortunately, there are so many places where we don’t trust, we don’t believe in people, and that fear and anxiety leads to worse outcomes for everyone.

I also respect the fact that if you say to me Rabbi, I am not sure I believe in God, so what does it matter if God believes in me? To be fair, that’s a sermon for another day, and I don’t want to get lost in the weeds on that. But what I want to underscore is the power of our own beliefs to shape our reality. Consider the placebo effect: if we believe the medicine we are taking will help us, it can make a

² (Sanhedrin 38b)

difference in our medical condition even if it's only a sugar pill. The most impactful placebo, as studied by the British Medical Journal, compared actual surgical procedures with sham surgery, showing that the sham surgery helped in $\frac{3}{4}$ of all the cases, and for half of the cases it was as effective as the real surgery!³

By contrast, there is also the nocebo effect: if we believe that something will harm us, our perception has the ability to make that a reality. A study found that a high number of people have negative attitudes towards generic drugs believing that they are somehow less efficacious than the brand name or have more side effects. In the end, the study found that people experienced more negative side effects from those drugs because of those expectations.⁴ Our perception of humanity has the capacity to be a placebo or a nocebo. As Bregman notes in his book:

“If we believe most people can't be trusted, that's how we'll treat each other, to everyone's detriment. Few ideas have as much power to shape the world as our view of other people. Because ultimately, you get what you expect to get.”⁵ We have the ability to shape our understanding of the world, and one way we do that is through laws: our legal system can be designed with a belief that human beings have the capacity to grow and be better than they've

³ Rutger Bregman, page 8-9

⁴ <https://www.verywellmind.com/nocebo-effect-4796628>

⁵ Rutger Bregman, page 9

been. Two weeks ago, through the work and effort of this community, led by Rabbi Reiser and many of our congregants including Eve Landau and Jeannie Rosenthal, we helped pass a law that signals that belief in other people. A law that focuses on how we all make mistakes: that's part of being human, and at the same time we all have the inherent capacity for kindness and to become better people if given the opportunity.

WRT is one of the many congregations that is a part of RAC NY, the Religious Action Center for New York state. Back in June, we were instrumental in passing the Less is More bill, and Governor Hochul signed it into law the day after Yom Kippur, two weeks ago today. This law changes our parole system, ensuring that thousands of New Yorkers won't go back to jail for minor non criminal technical violations. As is noted in the press release: nearly 5000 people are incarcerated just because they missed a meeting, went out to get diapers after curfew, or the countless small ways they made a mistake on their way back into society.

As we go out into our weekend, I hope you'll continue to ponder with me: what might the world look like if we believed in other people? If we believed that God believed in us? How many challenges have been brought into our world and our own lives because of our lack of faith in other human beings?