



## **Like It—Or Not? The Existential Tension of Similarity and Difference**

***Rabbi Jan Uhrbach***

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach brings a passion for prayer to the JTS community. Through her work as founding director of the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, she develops and oversees programs and discussions, as well as prayer services on Shabbat and festivals, for the JTS community and the general public.

Rabbi Uhrbach loves being in the classroom at JTS, where she teaches courses on the meaning of liturgy, and a course she created titled “The Art of Leading Prayer.” She is tasked also with developing curriculum and resources for professionals and lay people seeking to revitalize their leadership and experience of prayer.

In addition to her role at JTS, Rabbi Uhrbach serves as the founding rabbi of the Conservative Synagogue of the Hamptons in Bridgehampton, Long Island, enabling her to mentor many of JTS’s rabbinical and cantorial students in a congregational setting. She has played a key role in the acclaimed Lev Shalem prayer book series as associate editor of Siddur Lev Shalem, the Shabbat and festival siddur published by the Rabbinical Assembly in 2016. She also served on the editorial committee for Machzor Lev Shalem.

A distinguished teacher of Torah, she is also a member of the Wexner Heritage faculty, and has taught and served as scholar-in-residence in many synagogues.

Rabbi Uhrbach was ordained at JTS, where she was a Wexner Graduate Fellow. A graduate of Yale University (’85) and Harvard Law School (’88), Rabbi Uhrbach served as Law Clerk to Federal District Judge Kimba M. Wood. She then joined the New York law firm of Satterlee Stephens Burke & Burke LLP, where she specialized in media litigation, becoming a partner of the firm in January 1996.

### 1. Genesis 1:26-27

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ ...  
וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ...

God said, Let us make a Human in our likeness, like our image...

So God made the Human being in God's image - in the image of God, God created it (Gen. 1:26-27).

### 2. Genesis 5:3

ג וַיְחִי אָדָם שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה וַיֻּלְדַּד בְּדְמוּתוֹ כְּצַלְמוֹ...

Adam lived 130 years and he had a child in his likeness, like his image

### 3. Sanhedrin 37a

לפיכך נברא אדם יחידי ... ולהגיד גדולתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד - כולן דומין זה לזה, ומלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא טבע כל אדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון - ואין אחד מהן דומה לחבירו. לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר: בשבילי נברא העולם.

For this reason was man created alone (perhaps also tr. singularly)... To proclaim the greatness of the Holy Blessed One: for if a person strikes many coins from one mold, they all resemble one another, but the Supreme Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Holy Blessed One, fashioned every person in the stamp of the first human, and yet not one of them resembles his fellow. Therefore every single person is obliged to say: the world was created for my sake.

### 4. Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words*, pp. 179-80, 187-88

The main intent of this passage [Sanhedrin 37a], in line with the first meaning, is to urge the utter necessity of personal responsibility over the lives of others. Every human being is a unique version of original Man, individually stamped in the image of God. Only the wicked look on at other people's woes and say, "What does this trouble have to do with us?" The rest of us understand, in the words of the Bible-minded English poet John Donne, that no man is an island.

But note the Mishnaic reflection on the matter of human diversity. This is a bonus insight, extending beyond the asserted importance of every soul. In principle, one could have argued for the sanctity of each human life even if we were all essentially uniform, all resembling Adam like peas in a pod or coins in a mint. So the Mishnah has something further to tell us: every soul is "a full world," and every such world is different from all others.

This is not Western individualism but Jewish individuation. The single person is not weightier than the group, nor the "I" more important than the "you" or the "we." Instead every one of us must be infinitely important to the others and to the collective, because we are each a unique variant God's image. Or, if you are secular and claim this legacy, we are each a singular chunk of humanity. Unrepeatable, irreplaceable, and part of a whole. . . .

Of course, community is of tremendous importance. The Jewish individual is defined by others, even as he or she disputes and quarrels with them. And also defined by the laws, even if he or she chooses to appeal against them, rebel against them, or flatly ignore them. As long as we still have our common words, we are a community. And community has been a natural mode of Jewish existence from Jacob's bustling tents to today's reawakening kibbutzim. Even Tel Aviv, crowded with highly individualistic self-seekers, is more intimate and familiar and public-voiced than any other big city we know.

No man is an island, wrote the great Donne. The novelist among us adds: true, no man is an island, but we are all peninsulas. Partially on our own, surrounded by the dark waters, and partially linked to a continent, to other peninsulas, to the plural noun.

5. Adin Steinsaltz, The Thirteen Petalled Rose (Basic Books Inc., 1980), pp. 147-49

Here we have what is perhaps the second paradox of the search for self, **that only by ceasing to see oneself as a supremely independent essence can one say with all sincerity, This is where I am.** It is the self-obliterating view of oneself that provides the true basis of all existence, that makes possible a firm grasp of the truth of reality. For then the circumscribing immensities of existence take shape in one's understanding, and it becomes apparent that one is a part of them.

...[W]ithin this great circle, which includes all the levels of man, each person can discover the special lines of his own direction -- which again, are not simply random points in reality but are the expressions of his individual personality, the shape of his soul. Because even when all the souls flow in and out of the same primal source, and all similarly aspire to reach out and grow and return to this source, even then, the way of every soul -- for all it has in common with and resembles all the others -- is unique unto itself and justifies its separate existence. Myriads of sparks reflect the primal light, everyone of them with its own situation and its own set of circumstances.

6. Jonathan Sacks, To Heal a Fractured World, p 100

Peace is a paradox. Many religions and cultures praise it and decry conflict and war, yet they engage in war and often find themselves in conflict. In war, even ordinary people become heroes. In pursuit of peace, even heroes are often afraid to take the risk. Those who show courage in the heat of battle are celebrated. Those who take risks for peace are all too often assassinated...

**The reason is that peace can come to seem to be a kind of betrayal. It involves compromise and settling for less than one would like. It has none of the purity and clarity of war, in which the issues -- self-defence, national honour, patriotism, pride -- are unambiguous and compelling. War speaks to our most fundamental sense of identity: there is an 'us' and a 'them', there are enemies and friends, and there is no possibility of confusing the two. When enemies shake hands, who is now the 'us' and who the 'them'? Peace involves a profound crisis of identity. The boundaries of self and other, friend and foe, must be redrawn.**

7. Leviticus 19:17-18

לֹא־תִשְׂנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכַח תוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֲטָא :  
לֹא־תִקֹּם וְלֹא־תִטַּר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹד אָנֹכִי יי :

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur not guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. **Love your fellow as yourself.** I am Adonai.

8. Leviticus 19:33-34

וְכִי־יָגוּר אִתְּךָ גֵר בְּאַרְצְכֶם לֹא תוֹנוּ אֹתוֹ : כְּאֶזְרַח מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לָכֶם הַגֵּר | הַגֵּר אֶתְכֶם וְאַהֲבַת לוֹ  
כְּמוֹד כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אָנֹכִי יי אֶלְהֵיכֶם :

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; **you shall love him as yourself**, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I Adonai am your God.

<p>Focus on one or more <b>personal relationships</b> in your life.</p> <p>How does seeing the similarity and commonality between the two of you serve you in constructive or positive ways? How is it harmful or damaging?</p> <p>How does seeing the differences and distinctions between the two of you serve you in constructive and positive ways, and how is it harmful or damaging?</p>		
	<b>SEE COMMONALITY</b>	<b>SEE DIFFERENCE</b>
<b>CONSTRUCTIVE ASPECTS AND FUNCTIONS</b>		
<b>DAMAGING ASPECTS AND FUNCTIONS</b>		

<p>Focus now on <b>one or more groups in the public sphere</b> that you experience as “other” (whether because of race, religion, world view, values, economic status, etc).</p> <p>How is seeing the similarity and commonality between that group and you (and/or groups you identify with) helpful and positive? How is it damaging, negative, harmful or limiting?</p> <p>How is seeing the differences and distinctions between that group and you (and/or groups you identify with) helpful and positive, and how is that damaging, negative, harmful or limiting?</p>		
	<b>SEE COMMONALITY</b>	<b>SEE DIFFERENCE</b>
<b>POSITIVE ASPECTS AND FUNCTIONS</b>		
<b>NEGATIVE ASPECTS AND FUNCTIONS</b>		

**For each of these charts, what can you do to keep your response in the top two quadrants?**