

PUTTING GOD SECOND—RH 5777

With everything swirling in our world,
this *meshuganneh* [maddening] state of our lives,
coupled with the meaning of this moment,
I've got a loaded question for you:

Who's On FIRST?...

To baseball fans, or more likely classic comedy buffs,
The answer to Abbot & Costello's late 1930's burlesque sketch
Is almost always a question:

Who's on first... What's on second... I Don't Know's on third.

BUT shift from America's national pastime

To our annual communal call to R & R—Repentance and Renewal,
And the answer can hardly be in doubt...

No matter which name you choose they all point to the same position:
Playing FIRST...

Melech Ha-Chayim:

"O King who delights in Life, inscribe us in the Book of Life."

Playing FIRST...

Avinu Malkeynu:

"Our Father, Our King, be gracious and answer us, for we have little merit."

Playing FIRST...

Ki Atah Hu Dayan u'Mochi-ach, Yode'ah va-Eyd:

"In truth You are Judge and Arbiter—Counsel and Witness"

...GOD is on First [and foremost]... *"There is none else."*

So gathering here once again to affirm God's Sovereignty,
Beseeching The Bench for leniency,
we operate on the faith assumption that the greater our humility,
The more severe our self-denial,
the better our chance of Divine forgiveness.

YET simply putting God First may not be the decisive answer...

At least not if you bear in mind the world in which we live.

Just glance out your window...

Rabbi Erica Brown called these past few months

"The Half-Mast Summer" [Jewish Week, Sept 2, 2016]

National sign of our collective grief,
the flag seems always to be flying at half-mast.

Indeed, the tragedies are too many to name.

Is it the Orlando night-club massacre?

Or is it the five Dallas Police Officers?

Wait, was it for Baton Rouge? Or Charlotte or Tulsa...or Mid-town!?

From Fort Hood to the Church killing in Charleston,

Cold-blooded murder somehow sanctioned by sacred means?

Shift overseas...as citizens of the world our humanity is wounded again & again

At a McDonald's in Munich or a shopping mall in Bavaria...

In Nice—the terrorist in a truck mowing down over 80 vacationers celebrating France's Bastille Day on the promenade...

...What links the murder of a French priest in Normandy on July 26th with two car-bombings that killed more than 50 in Syria the next day, with 25 educators slaughtered at a Teachers' Institute in Fallujah 2 days later with a child suicide-bomber murdering 50 and injuring nearly 100 at a wedding in Turkey not a week after that?....

The list of incidents seems almost endless

yet the cited source is virtually always the same

Faith in God should help us love our neighbor, but from Isis to the KKK,

Divinely inspired hatred destroys lives every day....

Faith in God should compel us to care for the poor and the stranger,

But fostering disdainful rhetoric—thanks to far-right religious groups

like the Army of God, Concerned Christian Watch, the Aryan Brotherhood minorities are reviled; difference divides the world into us/them.

HOW do we reconcile the disconnect?...

For while commanding its adherents to act morally,

a life rooted in faith at times undermines the common humanity it advocates.

WHAT, then, is God's Place in a world so often reeling with religious extremism?

WHAT is our place in this daily exchange of human affairs,

where religion can just as easily fuel injustice, incite riot, rouse hostility, even seem to sanction violence....?

WHO's on FIRST is a most serious question that compels a much deeper answer.

Religious revolutionary, head of the most influential, pluralistic

worldwide Jewish educational powerhouse founded by his father,

based in Jerusalem, Modern-Orthodox Rabbi Donniel Hartman,

teaching value-based Jewish learning steeped in democratic ideals

to a student body including top-ranking Israeli Army officers,

thousands of Israeli High Schoolers,

American-Jewish collegians as well as progressive American Rabbis,

not to mention hundreds of Reform congregations around the country, just recently released a new book whose intent, as its sub title attests is: *“To Save Religion From Itself”...*

Hartman, dynamic teacher, inspired innovator, who could quite easily be cast by his own orthodox brethren as a heretic is anything but.

His primary aim, as the book’s title makes loud and clear is by Putting God Second.

Boldly, Hartman sets forth the essential problem.

The critical flaw of the life of faith is the nature of faith *itself*.

YES, Jewish faith...as he notes,

“The same people who speak in the name of religion come down on the side of discrimination toward non-Jewish national minorities in Israel...limiting religious freedoms for non-Jews...and are vociferously against pursuing any peace with our Palestinian neighbors.”

[Putting God Second, pg 16]

Hartman identifies religion’s auto-immune disease wherein a faith system, in this case, Judaism, often undermines its own most cherished values.

The two major infectious causes:

1...*God Intoxication*, when our devotion to God is so all-consuming, We can see no one else—not their needs, nor even their humanity...OR
2...*God Manipulation*, where our feelings of closeness to the Creator, Implying we know what God truly wants, move us to transform the Holy One into our Advocate, furthering our personal agenda...Religion thus becomes rationalization for sectarian causes, or at times, unjust ends never at all intended.

Consider your response to the crucial question: Who’s on First?

Hartman offers Hillel as a model of what an antidote to counter the effects of both God Intoxication and God Manipulation might look like.

The classic Talmudic tale you know well:

...A gentile comes to the great sage Hillel and asks:

“Teach me the Torah while I stand on one foot.”

In other words, can you give me this religion in a nutshell, the most central, sacred Jewish teaching I can carry w/me wherever I go?

Rather than respond as his colleague Shammai did,

chasing the potential Jewish convert out of his office with a stick,

Hillel famously responds: “What is hateful to you, do not do to any person.

That’s the whole Torah—the rest is commentary. Now go & study it.”

Brilliant!...

Precisely because of what is underscored as well as what is left unsaid...

Hillel couldn't make it more clear: Being Jewish is about being human;

Caring for others as you'd hope they'd care for you.

The Torah's goal is therefore to make you a *Mentsch*:

A humane, heartfelt, compassionate human being...

The "Rest" is just commentary—a How-To Guide.

And, significantly, what's missing from Hillel's core teaching?

You got it: **God!**

"Tradition's overarching agenda is to regulate moral conduct, shaping individuals and by extension, communities, who place the treatment of others at the center of their lives." [Putting God Second, D. Hartman, Beacon Press, pg 70]

It's not that all the rite and ritual—the exercises in transcendence, are a waste pitch; nor is the spiritual contemplation for naught...

But to overcome the auto-immune disease

to which the faithful can so easily fall prey,

God's presumed position must be reconceived.

"Only to the extent that moral responsibility to others is not merely considered as one factor but accepted as the lens through which Jewish believers evaluate our religious practices, will the essence of Torah be fulfilled." [Putting God Second, p 71]

Elevating the human over the holy profoundly reframes our faith system for it alters our answer to that key question:

God is NOT on First, but rather on Second!

Which does not imply that God is *secondary*...

On the contrary—Putting God Second enables us to reposition our approach to the Holy by embracing the Holiness all around us.

For if God is "second" who then must be on first?

...Just look around....

The people in the pews sitting right next to you, familiar faces, though you may not even know their names...

Strangers on the subway or Metro North,

Co-workers in that strategy session or client meeting...

Local folks, regulars on the AM Starbucks line...

Who's on first?...

For starters, your family...yes the kids who never call...

Your cousin who always tells the same embarrassing stories,

And your mother who has a PhD in guilt...

...Who's on First?

Your "neighbor"—the ones you must love as yourself...

Even if they don't look like you, or speak your language,
or could ever afford to live in your neighborhood.

For if God is "second" our putting others first means *every* person we meet
no matter who—no matter where,
somehow reflects that same Sacred Image implanted within us all....

IF God loves me best—my kind, my color, my viewpoint, my faith
THEN God is only First because I am first....

BUT Putting God Second means *YOU* are as well.

Now, if you are like many,
making annual pilgrimage to the temple these High & Holy Days,
you could easily get a false impression about religious positioning.
Just check out today's Torah! As Hartman sees it,
The God of the Akedah, our faith feature, who summons us today
is part of the problem. When the call from the Divine comes,
Abraham's capacity for critical thought, for questioning,
so prevalent prior at Sodom & Gemorrah, somehow flies out the window.
A God on High who seeks the sacrifice of humanity's future as a
validation of its absolute faith is a God of inhumane intoxication.
With Abraham's moral voice mute, "he ceases to see the boy standing
next to him." [Putting God Second, D. Hartman, Beacon Press, pg 47]
Abraham's unhesitating "*Hineni—Here I Am*" traditionally understood
as the response of unwavering religious conviction,
For Hartman, bespeaks a "God-induced indifference." [Putting God Second, pg 46]

18th century rationalist philosopher Emanuel Kant
saw in Abraham the model of an almost foolish faith.

*"In certain cases, the human being can be sure that the voice he hears is not
God's...As an example—Abraham who was willing to butcher his only son at God's
command. Abraham should have replied to this reportedly divine voice:
'That I ought not to kill my son is quite certain...But that you are God, of that I am not
certain at all.'"* [Inheriting Abraham, Jon Levinson, pg 107]

On this day so High & Holy...beginning our ten-day intensive
when introspection and inner-reflection, we assume,
will lead us not alone to repentance, but punch our tickets in the Book of Life,

reconsidering God's place—and thus our own can revision our Judaism in a way that just might change the way we see our world as well. Now...I'm hearing the whispers, internal though they may be. Isn't this Putting God Second just a catchy title, a slick-slogan? After all, how can a faith driven by Divine centrality, grounded in monotheism, even attempt to operate in a way that actually puts God second...?

Ironically, it is the “Dean of American Jewish Philosophers,” Having forged our movement's theology for over half a century, Who just passed away this January, a man who spent his life-work confronting the questions of God's Presence and place in our lives—by making them first & foremost as the key to Jewish being, who remains the model of how it is we can put God second....

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz,

The Distinguished University Professor of Jewish Religious Thought & Education At HUC-JIR taught Reform's future spiritual leadership for over 50 years. And lest you think some high-minded intellectual, some ivory-tower academic could actually make a difference—a measurable impact, know well: WE are the visionary, vibrant Reform movement we are today, certainly the LT community we are in 2016, because of the impassioned theological inspiration of a singular thinker and teacher.

...Since Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in the early 1960's, there has been no other systematic, integrated Jewish Theology on the American Jewish scene, and it is no overstatement to assert that Dr' Borowitz's Renewing the Covenant: a Theology for the Post-Modern Jew, published in 1991, brought a clarity of thought and consistency of understanding that framed the future of what it would mean thereafter to live as a progressive Jew in the 21st cent.

As his magnum opus was released, Dr B decided to offer a class at HUC, Using the book's exploration as its basis...

So it was the winter/spring of '92,

in my fifth year here as Associate Rabbi & Educator,

[beginning to anticipate a change in role that could involve my long term future with our congregation,]

that Cantor Ed Graham and I, obtaining permission to audit,

would meet for breakfast at 5:45 [the Nautilus had just opened!]

then make the drive to catch our 8AM weekly seminar at 1 West 4th St, HUC!

To say the class was a “lively exchange” falls far short. It was vintage Borowitz, with one of the dozen or so rabbinic students presenting a chapter each week and then Dr. B, wielding intellectual integrity like a sword, slaying their assumptions...

Fortunately, as Cantor Graham [who had a PhD in 19th century Eng Lit]

And I remarked after many a class, we did not have to publicly present.

Still, the dialogue drew us in, and I emerged at semester’s end

Affirming what I innately knew:

COVENANT was the cornerstone of our Jewish existence.

SO...It made sacred sense as I was transitioning to my new role as Senior Rabbi that the Board of Trustees would go on a leadership retreat, in Fall ’94, to explore what membership meant in **covenantal** terms...

Then again a year later, to extend the dialogue as to how we could frame A LT Mission Statement, a first step to creating our congregational **covenant**

Anticipating our 50th two years away, in the Spring ’96

we created an LT Task Force to put together what would become our **Covenant** of Membership...

So after a temple leadership exchange in ’97 we emerged with our LT Covenant, crafted by the over 70 involved...And, important as the words themselves are, beautifully illustrated on the illuminated manuscript hanging in our front foyer, an art-piece signed by then President Kenny Gordon & me, Publicly proclaimed, celebrating our 50th Jubilee year in ’98,

it is the *process* that was paramount;

testament to Dr Borowitz’s legacy of living Covenant.

What is this all about,

if not reconsidering God’s position in relation to our Jewish lives...

Covenant unfolds as we engage in the dialogue,

Recognizing the tension between God’s authority and our individual autonomy.

Neither can be sacrificed nor subsumed in living out our faith.

THUS the culminating lesson I teach every year after our Confirmands, the 10th graders, have experienced all the other God-thinkers, on Dr. Borowitz...

Covenant is not so much a dialectic—a two-way tension, as it is a trialectic...

SO, sitting right here on the bimah floor... we form a triangle with our fingers, as I explain Borowitz’s brilliant and life-altering truth.[Triangle w/fingers]

Here is GOD—here’s the congregation of Israel—here is you!

Every Jewish act you do, or decide not to do; Every belief you take on as your own,

Every response to better or embitter our world;

impacts the entire Congregation Israel—and GOD!

This is the trialectic—three-way evolving, dynamic relationship of COVENANT wherein your daily decisions and life-directions inform God’s Presence, as a Jew covenanted through community.

And why is this theological construct so powerful?

Because Dr. Borowitz, re-envisioning our Judaism through the prism of Covenant 25 years ago, provides the antidote to religion’s auto-immune disease today! It is not some top down hierarchy of holiness that determines the “line-up,” but the connection we develop, the commitment and the questions we bring, that makes covenant real.

As Dr. Borowitz wrote in his concluding admission [in *Renewing the Covenant*]:

“I cannot deny the risks: Does my call for a community openness so tolerant of individuality put God’s authority to question?...Yet any theory that makes democracy our spiritual principle must face that risk...The demand that everyone in our community tolerate other Jews’ differing views testifies to our distress at Jewish and inter-religious conflict. As long as Jews continue to believe that a God-given dignity inheres in each single self, a Judaism that requires the surrender of humane conscience will be unacceptable.”

[*Renewing the Covenant*, EBB, pgs 295,282]

...WHO’s on First?...

Every person you meet and treat as a potential covenantal partner,
With dignity, no matter the apparent difference,
imprinted with the same sacred Image inside you...

The last time I shared a *punim to punim* exchange with Dr. Borowitz

Back in early 2012 remains for me a precious tribute to his legacy...

Team teaching with Dr Ellenson [then President of HUC] a seminar on Covenantal Ethics, Dr. B had invited a former student [now a rabbi] to attend his class and services, and then to join the student body at the Thursday communal lunch, normally reserved for sermon/service review...

This particular Thursday, with Molly Kane’s senior sermon questioning our place in not fully embracing the LGBTQ community, the purpose of the lunch session was *Teshuvah*: Dr Borowitz’s own struggle with God’s place and his personal position...

In a powerful moment of living covenant, something the likes of which I’d never before seen, confessing before his community that, evolving through his internal questioning over time, he’d been wrong on the rigidity of his position, refusing to sign the ordination Smicha’s

of Gay and Lesbian students, a rabbi, who a decade prior, in solidarity with fellow gay and lesbian colleagues, refused to have Dr. B sign, gave his Ordination Diploma to Dr B, who signed it before the entire HUC community as witness and, as he'd be the first to add, before God as well.

As Dr. Ellenson later described:

“His humanity, his piety, his ever-wrestling with God—his frailty and greatness were all on display that moment.”

Quickly rushing out of the communal lunch to set up Senior Seminar, the class I was about to teach next door, I emerged 20 minutes later to greet students only to see Dr. B, accompanied by his daughter, slowly approaching in the hall. His head hunched a bit, his body bent, now 90...

Yet his mind still discerning...

As his student and devotee, it suddenly occurred to me to let him know the impact he'd had...Unprepared, I took his hand ...

“Dr. Borowitz—as if I need to tell you, please know that our generation carries with it the questions you taught us.

We are struggling with God's Place and our own...

We are living covenant, or at least trying, thanks to you...”

I expected some erudite one-liner response.

Instead, with a grateful smile and without a word,

Dr. B. slowly leaned over and kissed me on the cheek,

As his hand gently touched the other side of my face.

Frozen there for a moment, tears welled up as I watched him walk away.

In his eulogy at his [and our] teacher's funeral, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, fellow longtime faculty colleague, painted the picture of the people's prophet—calling us to Covenant.

“He became the conscience of our community...Gene was blessed and cursed with the insistence that his colleagues, students and Jews everywhere think clearly, act ethically and behave credibly, just as God would want. There was not a meeting, not a moment...when being with him did not remind us of the heights to which we might strive to be better people...He was not just talking about God, but trying to be godly.”

WHAT does it mean to put God second?

It means to live in Covenant,

wherein God cannot be the easy-out, nor the automatic answer.

It means to live in Covenant;
The daily dynamic where the surest way to feel God's Presence
is to honor it in every person...

For THEN...

Kindness will win out over cruelty,
Because every stranger will suddenly appear somehow familiar...
Then care will transcend color-lines;
Black lives and blue lives—red, yellow and brown lives,
all of them will matter, because humankind will be a rainbow,
every color essential for the spectrum to shine...

Putting God second means struggling...with the world as it is...and as it should be,
understanding that your life-choices, in Covenant,
impact God's Place in our world...

Putting God second means living Covenant:
being holy by being more human,
More open-minded, more humble-of-heart, more connected, more humane;
making room...for other's feelings, for other's differing faiths...
Knowing that your daily aspiration is to be a *mentsch!*
Which means making the people who share your world foremost...
For as you do, [putting God second,] making Covenant real,
God's Image will always be first....

SO with the Holy One right behind us—and between us....

In this New Year, May it be.

AMEN