

Episode 5 Chayei Sarah

I would like to dedicate this episode to the memory of the great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

I recall several years ago sitting with a friend of mine on the couch in my living room in Israel. I had just purchased a few house plants to give the room more life. Somehow, a conversation sprung up about the plants. As I looked at the plants, I thought about how attractive they were, how they brought energy to the living room, how they would probably need water and sunlight at some point. Moreover, I thought about the purchase itself. I didn't have much money at the time, and yet I concluded that the plants had been worth the price. I was satisfied. We talked about this. Then, my friend said something about the plants which shook my world. She said: Isn't it crazy how they are alive? I didn't really know what she was getting at. What do you mean? I asked. I mean, she continued, they are alive, just like you and me, they are living organisms like us.

I looked at the plants again. Suddenly, they began to freak me out a little. They were no longer these cute, friendly objects I had brought into my home. They were strange and foreign beings who greedily wolfed down copious quantities of water, who became temperamental when they didn't get their sunlight, who at every moment were engaged in sophisticated biological processes about which I was entirely ignorant. Damn, I thought, in wonder and horror and humility.

In 1923, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote a book which speaks to this question. Buber was born in Vienna in 1878 and grew up in Lviv, Ukraine. At that time, Lviv had a large German-speaking population, and so Buber's mother tongue was German. Buber titled his book in German *Ich und Du*. German has two forms of the word "You." There is the polite form, in which "You" would be *Sie*, as in *Sprechen Sie Deutsch?* Then there is the casual, familiar form, in which "You" is translated as "du." Here, you might think of the Rammstein hit from the nineties: "Du Hast"—du hast, you have.

In 2020, our culture is highly informal. So in Germany, you basically only address someone as "Sie" if they are your boss, or an elderly person, or one of your uptight coworkers. Today in Germany, everyone is looking for a reason to address someone as "du." But when Buber wrote *ich und du*, the culture was quite different. Back then, *du* was only used if you knew someone at the most intimate of levels. Indeed, children often addressed their parents as *Sie* rather than *du*. In Mozart's letters to his fathers in the late eighteenth-century, Mozart addresses his father as *Sie*. It would be like calling your father "sir." When Franz Kafka met his first fiancée, Felice Bauer, in 1912, they wrote each other long letters for weeks using the *Sie* form. Yet, in one letter, Kafka decided to take bold action. He wrote a letter to Felice in which he addressed her as *du* rather than *Sie*. Kafka regarded this switch from *Sie* to *du* as one of the most pivotal moments of his entire life.

Today, as mentioned, addressing someone as *du* is not even not a big deal, it's totally normal. But in Kafka's time and in Buber's time, I feel like it would be the equivalent of signing an e-mail or a letter with "love" as in, if I were to end a letter with "Love, Steve." We only end letters this way today with people who are in our family, extremely dear friends, or lovers.

In English, Buber's book *ich und du* usually gets translated to *I and Thou*. This is a terrible, atrocious translation, and yet it happens all the time. A few hundreds of years ago plus, English, believe it or not, actually also had its own version of the "du" form. In English, "du" was "thou." We also had thee, thine, thy—those are all the variations of "thou." But the informal

“you”—the “thou”—in English has long since died out. We now use formal “You” for everyone. And because of that, “You” is no longer formal—it’s just the way we address people. Ironically, “thou,” though the informal, casual form of “you” now sounds highly formal, stuffy, and antiquated. Buber’s book *ich und du* would be *literally* translated into English as *I and Thou*. Yes, technically that would be the correct translation. But it utterly distorts Buber’s intention. *I and Thou* sounds like two people who are utterly estranged from each other rather than two people who have reached the supreme levels of closeness and intimacy. *Ich und du* would be better translated into English as, perhaps, “me and you,” but even that title comes nowhere close to capturing the original.

In *ich und du*, Buber theorized that there are two types of relationships we are capable of forming with others. There is an “ich/du” relationship and an “ich/es” relationship. In German, “es” means “it” so this would be, in English, an “I/it” relationship.

Let’s begin with Buber’s conception of the “ich/es” relationship. To view another being as an “it” is to view that being as an object rather than a subject. It is to create distance and alienation between yourself and that being. The way I viewed my plants was in an “ich/es” relationship. I thought of them simply as my property and as existing only for my pleasure. But actually, we are viewing others as “it” in far more subtle, sneaky ways as well. When I sit on the U-Bahn, for example, obviously I am aware logically that I am surrounded by other human beings with their own histories, lives, and motivations. But while I know that intellectually, I generally do not *feel* this emotionally. I am caught up with my own life and my own thoughts, and so the other humans around me fade into the background. They become more or less objects of my experience rather than subjects unto themselves. In a sense, they become almost like the plants in my apartment. I don’t think that these people are breathing the same oxygen as I am, that their hearts are beating and pumping blood through their bodies, that they entered this U-Bahn with their own life story. Intellectually, of course, I know this, but emotionally I tend to forget. Now, maybe I am just a cold-hearted bastard, but I would imagine that we all think this way.

What is particularly alarming is that a person can be doing good, humanitarian, compassionate work for others and still view them through an “ich/es” lense. Let’s say, for example, you work in a soup kitchen to help homeless people. Even though you are helping needy people, are you viewing them as “homeless people”? That is, are you labeling them, objectifying them? Or are you viewing them as fellow humans? Or put another way, are you viewing them as you might view yourself? Now, I’m not trying to make you feel guilty. The last thing I will ever do on *The Schrift* is moralize to you. If you want to be moralized to or made to feel guilty for not being enough of a “good person,” there are hundreds, maybe thousands of other podcasts, that can provide that. I’m simply pointing it out. And actually, Buber believed that “ich/es” relationships were important, too. “I/it” is what allows us to structure and categorize our world. When we make decisions about human lives on a massive scale, it is necessary that we distance ourselves from each individual and think in more utilitarian terms. And practically speaking, I simply couldn’t get anything done on the U-Bahn if I had to remain vigilantly aware of each individual existence surrounding me.

Let us talk now about Buber’s conception of the “ich/du” relationship. The German word “du” already tells us much of what we need to know about this relationship. As mentioned, in Buber’s time, you would only address someone as “du” if you felt a special, precious bond with this person. To refer to someone as “du” is almost to say, you are one with me, you are in my “inner circle,” there need be no barriers or masks between us. English does not have a word for

this. At one time in the history of English, “thou” would have been that word, but now, as already mentioned, “thou” gives the exact opposite meaning.

According to Buber, when “it” becomes “du,” a transformation occurs. No longer do you view the person, animal, or plant as a kind of object or a point in space and time. Rather, all boundaries dissolve and the “object” becomes a kind of universe unto itself, in which you and that universe merge. As Buber wrote in *Ich und Du*: “No purpose intervenes between I and you, no greed and no anticipation. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated can true meeting occur.”

Buber’s inspiration for this philosophical idea came to him from an experience he had as a child. His father owned horses. Buber observed how, each morning, his father would greet each horse individually, giving it a certain name, petting it, acknowledging its individual existence. In short, Buber’s father was treating the horses as “du” rather than as “it.” But attaining the level of “ich/du” is not just about acknowledging the dignity of another animal or person. It is about unifying with them, such that you are absolutely present with them in that moment. I can perhaps offer an example from my own life. I have a dog named Meyer. Now, as much as I love Meyer, I tend to think of her as a “dog,” as “my dog,” as a dog that I “have.” Yet, there are times when I will take Meyer to the park and play with her. Sometimes, when we have run around a lot together, we both get tired and need to stop to catch our breath. When that happens, something remarkable occurs. Meyer and I are suddenly thinking the same thing and feeling the same way: we need air, we need to rest, we need to cool down, we need water. For a moment, the boundary between dog and human dissolves and we are the same being, we are ich and du. But of course, this relationship tends to be fleeting. Once we catch our breath, I begin thinking about my plans for the day and Meyer begins thinking about how she will get someone to give her food. We become estranged from each other.

The word “have” is a verb which we should consider. This word “have” is, at its core, a word which sets up an I-it relationship. I have a dog, I have a wife, I have fun. “Have” is to treat that which you “have” as your property. In Hebrew, in Russian, and probably in many other languages as well, there is no word for “have.” You can’t “have” anything in these languages. The language is constructed such that you must say “to me, there is.” So, to me, there is a dog—in Hebrew: “yesh li kelev” or in Russian: “u menya yest sabaka.” You can’t even say you have fun. You would have to say, to me there is fun. When these languages first evolved, why is it that “have” never become a word? This is not a trivial question. It may be that these early humans had a conception of life in which the self was always merging with its surroundings, in which you looked at a tree and didn’t see an object but somehow a part of yourself. So you could never “have” the tree. You could only be intertwined with the tree.

Buber believed that the modern world was forcing people to see everything as an “it” and not as a “you.” With industrialization, unfettered capitalism, and nationalism a tendency arose in which the world could be seen as something to be *exploited*. Buber believed that we must re-develop our ability to say “you” to the world rather than “it.” As already mentioned, Buber saw “I-it” constructions as necessary to human survival and productivity. But it is only through “I-you” that one can feel complete and connected with the universe.

By learning how to treat the world as “du” rather than “it,” one also learns how to connect with the ultimate “du”—that of God. Our conception of God is, unfortunately, also often an “I-it” relationship. We tend to think of God as a bearded man in the sky, ready to reward us if we are good and to punish us if we are evil. God becomes a kind of businessman for us, with whom we negotiate. But we have been to outer space; we now know that God does not live there.

You cannot “have” a God. In Hebrew, the word for being or to be is “lehiyot.” This word has the same root as God’s name. God, then, is *being*; God is in everything, including, technically, in you. When we can address anything as “du,” we are, whether we realize it or not, connecting with the Eternal, with being, with God.

I remember opening up a German Bible at some point a few years ago, and noticing that God was always addressed as “du” and not as “Sie.” I recall thinking this was rather strange. Shouldn’t we address God with respect, prostrate ourselves before Him, treat him as the ultimate Sir? But then I realized: how unhealthy *is* that? To speak to Being and to the Universe as though it’s separate from us, as though we must be polite and use proper etiquette, as though we could “offend” the universe. Of course God should be “du”! And this is, by the way, why I feel entirely comfortable playing Kendrick Lamar at the end of this podcast. Kendrick Lamar and all of the “bad” words he uses is just as much a part of the holiness of life and the connection with the eternal “du” as is a prayer written in King James’ English. Now, what’s truly tragic is that most English bibles and prayer books address God as “thou” or “thee.” In King James’ time, these words would have meant “du.” But now, they sound old-fashioned and highly formal. Today, to address God as “thou” is to exponentially increase our feeling of estrangement from the Eternal.

I got into a conversation with someone about my podcast the other day, who happened to be an atheist. She told me that she didn’t want to listen to my podcast because it seemed too religious for her. She said that she didn’t believe in God; rather, she believed in the holiness of nature. I was astounded by this remark. I thought to myself: how can someone view God and the holiness of nature as utterly distinct, when in fact they should be seen as one and the same? It’s totally fine if you don’t believe in God and are an Atheist. I have no problem with that. Nietzsche, my favorite philosopher, was a notorious atheist. But has our society really fallen so far, that we think that believing in the holiness of nature is a *rejection* of God rather than an endorsement of God? This type of thinking, of course, can be blamed on the crude conception our society has of God as a businessman in the sky with a long beard ready to smite you if you offend his fragile ego. It’s time we do away with this image.

In the Parsha for this week, Abraham decides that he must find a wife for his son Isaac. He sends his servant, Ephron, to search for a wife for Isaac in Abraham’s homeland of Nahor. Ephron decides that he will sit down by the town’s fountain. At this time of the evening, women from all over the town are coming to the fountain to fetch water, as it were, for their families. Ephron tries to decide who he will select to be Isaac’s wife. Ephron comes up with an idea: the woman who offers him water *and offers water* to his camels will be the woman he asks to be Isaac’s wife. Suddenly, Rebecca appears, young and beautiful, with a pitcher of water. She comes over to Abraham’s servant, Ephron, and offers him water to drink. Then, fatefully, she asks Ephron if his camels would like a drink of water as well. Rebecca has passed Ephron’s test. But more importantly, we can say that Rebecca seems to enter an “ich/du” relationship with the camels rather than “I/it”. To offer water to the camels demonstrates Rebecca’s compassion, her kindness, and her willingness to connect with all beings.

Ephron gives Rebecca a golden nose ring (yes, apparently, they had nose rings back then) and two golden bracelets. Rebecca then invites Ephron to her family’s home for a meal. When Ephron arrives, Rebecca’s brother Laban comes outside. The Torah remarks that Laban immediately noticed the nose ring and the two golden bracelets in his sister’s hand. From this, Laban concludes that Ephron is a wealthy man, a good person to know, and he goes out to greet Ephron. He behaves flatteringly with Ephron, inviting him to come in and to give the camels a

place to sleep for the night. This is, quite clearly, and “I-it” relationship. Laban is only generous and friendly to Ephron because he thinks he can get something from it.

What follows is a festive meal in which Ephron is wined and dined and in which Ephron connects with Rebecca’s family. Yet, it should be obvious that there is something strange about this entire interaction. The whole purpose of Ephron’s visit is to find a wife for Isaac, yet Isaac is nowhere to be found. He is back in Israel, of course. It is Ephron who is forming the ich/du relationship with Rebecca and her family. The groom-to-be, Isaac, is not there. Rebecca, of course, agrees to travel back with Ephron to Israel and to marry Isaac, despite not yet having met him. Their first encounter is dramatic and also a bit strange. Rebecca arrives on a camel and sees Isaac from across the field. She asks Ephron, “Who is that?” To which Ephron replies: he is my master, he is Isaac. Rebecca then reacts by covering her face with a veil.

Why does Rebecca cover her face at this moment? I believe that this a symbolic gesture which we should take very seriously. The symbolism here is: Rebecca and Isaac will be reluctant to form an “ich/du” relationship. Rebecca puts on the veil as though one puts on a mask.

The name of the parsha this week is “chai Sarah” or, in English, the life of Sarah. The parsha begins with the death of Isaac’s mother and Abraham’s wife, Sarah. So Isaac’s mother has just died. When Isaac finally meets Rebecca, the Torah reads that he brought Rebecca into his mother’s tent, and he took Rebecca, and she became his wife, and he loved her. Finally, the Torah reads that “Isaac was comforted for the loss of his mother.” In light of what we have learned so far from Martin Buber, this last sentence should jump off the page at you. Isaac did not see Rebecca as a *du*. Rather, she served a specific purpose. She provided him with comfort after the loss of his mother. He had formed more of an “I-it” relationship with Rebecca rather than a “Me-You” or “ich/du” relationship.

And, indeed, the failure for Rebecca and Isaac to see each other as “du” will be apparent in the parsha for next week. Here, we will see how Rebecca and Isaac are living separate lives, are estranged from each other, and how Rebecca even instructs her son Jacob to deceive his father Isaac. This is, in short, a couple—and eventually a family—which does not communicate with each other.

Now, when I first heard of Martin Buber’s concept of “ich-du”, I thought, okay, sounds easy enough. I will just start connecting with people and animals more. I will see them as “du” and not as “it.” But, actually, this sounds a lot easier than it actually is. For various reasons, the “I-it” way of seeing the world pulls on us like a magnet. It is very difficult to break through from “I-it” to “I-you.” Indeed, it often happens that “I-you” occurs unconsciously, without our intending it, and the moment is over within minutes or even seconds. This is, perhaps, what happens with me after I run around with my dog. Why is it so difficult for us to get outside of ourselves and merge with the universe? It is because of our egos and our sense of self. We do not want to let go of the ego and the self. We hold on to the ego because we think in terms of our own self-interests and we think that, by continuing to do what *we want* and what benefits us, we will end up better off. Yet, paradoxically, when we become truly invested in others, we actually become happier and more comfortable with ourselves.

I discovered this phenomenon through a meditation practice known as *Metta Meditation*. Fortunately, we can train our minds to be more receptive to “ich/du” experiences and to “ich/du” perspectives. The *meta meditation* is one way of doing so. And I have attached a youtube recording of a meta meditation in the show notes. The *meta* meditation is a loving-kindness meditation which consists of five stages. In the first stage, you wish safety, health, and happiness to yourself. Now, when I first did this meditation, I was feeling pretty much good after the first

stage. Sweet, I thought. I am going to get what I want—health and happiness. I was satisfied. But interestingly, as I continued through the next four stages, in which you extend love and kindness to others, I actually began to feel a lot happier myself. In the second stage, you wish safety, health, and happiness to someone whom you love. In the third stage, you wish these things to a stranger, someone who you may see on the street, but whom you do not personally know. In the fourth stage, you wish safety, health, and happiness to a person you have difficulty with, even to an enemy. And the fifth stage is the most compelling. Here, you wish safety, health, and happiness to all beings on the planet, loved ones, animals, plants, strangers. I recall listening to the famous meditation teacher Mark Williams guide me through this meditation. When we reached the fifth stage, he said to extend love and kindness to all beings on the planet. Then he said something which I will never forget. He said “remember that all beings include...” Include what, I wondered? I thought he would say something like, all beings include ‘the little ant on the sidewalk’ or the drunk guy always wandering around town or the house plant in your living room. I had no idea what he was going to say at the end, but I assumed it would be include “something which I should feel very very sympathetic for.” But no, instead he said: “remember that all beings include—wait for it, wait for it—all beings include, YOU.”