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The TV show *Space Force* features the same kludgy cast of characters you would expect to find in any normal sitcom. The pretentious artist, who happens to be a scientist, the rebellious teenager, the tragic commander, and the young driven pilot in crisp uniform moving up the ranks to fulfill the promise of the American dream. While ostensibly the show follows the commander, played by the famous comedian Steve Carrell, over the course of the first season the focus begins to shift to the other characters, and eventually draws a lock on the pilot. Originally trained to fly in combat the show begins the pilot's tenure with the audience as an underutilized soldier, set out to menial tasks flying a general back and forth between meetings in a military helicopter or babysitting the rebellious teenager, fulfilled begrudgingly but unquestioningly. Eventually, the pilot begins to look out for opportunities for more exciting assignments and by the middle of the season we see the pilot training for even higher altitudes, vying for a spot on the first Space Force tour to the moon. After a great deal of studying and a series of successful tests, our hero is selected to be one of the crew in that first launch and prepares for the historic journey.

The launch scene begins with a great deal of suspense, much more so than the earlier slapstick of Steve Carell unwittingly initiating the launch of an empty rocket when he leaned back and rested his foot casually on a big red button. Rather, in this scene they captured the risk of the enterprise. In our very real world many people have sacrificed their lives in the pursuit of exploring the regions beyond our atmosphere. The show pays some respect to the severity of the activity. But after a small hiccup or two, and a little movie magic suspense, our team launches in pursuit of the small moon orbiting our humble planet. Adrift in the sea of space our pilot channels back down to Earth to seek the advice of a love interest at mission control. One quiet night in the middle of the journey the two share an intimate conversation, all other crew absent from both the

room of the spaceship and the control center, our pilot reveals a bit of anxiety with Dr. Kaifang. It's not every day that someone gets to step foot on the moon. It's been almost 50 years since the last US landing and the entire world will be watching their descent. Our pilot knows all the procedures for arriving safely, and beginning the surface excursion, but what to say at that first look over the horizon to our little blue dot? How can anyone capture the thrill, privilege and surprise of stepping foot on a new planet? Armstrong had the immortal line "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind" What would the captain say? At the end of their conversation the two settle on the sweet and confident line, "it's good to be back on the moon." They share it back and forth a couple of times, "it's good to be back on the moon." Then the show reverts to other storylines for a bit, to give time for the crew to complete the remaining distance to the moon's surface. Eventually we return to our pilot and crew as they make their descent. The lunar module glides down to the landing spot and makes contact with the gray planet, from mission control the commander congratulates the crew and then invites our pilot to be the first to emerge on the new surface. The captain takes a deep breath, goes through the procedure to head out of the spacecraft, double-checks the suit and oxygen and then opens the door lock. We watch as the character descends the latter and takes a first gliding step, and then another. Wide-eyed and overcome with feeling, live broadcasting to thousands on planet earth she opens up her lips and over the intercom says "it's good to be black on the moon." Captain Ali you see, was the first black woman on the moon.

I love this line. It captures so much of what we carry inside ourselves. A classic Freudian slip. A word that enters our speech without our conscious intent and reveals not only what is floating just beneath the surface of our conscious thoughts but also what conflict is rife within us, a bubbling geyser kept underground by the needs of daily life but ready to burst forth at any moment, and the greater the pressure, the more likely and more powerful the outburst. This character was carrying around the pressure of being black and a woman, representing both communities and the third more exclusive

group of those who fall in the intersection of the two. In a highly stressful and impactful moment, she let out what was brewing, the anxiety of pioneering such a large group of people, representing the history, admiration and blame of a group of people far beyond her immediate self. And fearful of the way that others will see her given the context of her complexion.

I am reminded of this every time I walk around with my kippah. Without that particular identifier, it's unlikely that a passer-by would be able to identify me as a Jew. They might place me in a general category of people, one that could pin me as potentially Jewish along with any number of other possible backgrounds, but there's not much in my features to identify me as a Jew. Which is why I am especially mindful of that status when I enter a grocery store or walk around my neighborhood and I'm wearing one. I wonder about what others think about me, what questions they might want to ask. I feel more visible in that moment, less able to blend into a crowd of others that look like me, even if I have a different history. I rarely experience any racial slurs or hatred, but there's often a shift in the way people engage with me when I'm wearing a kippah. A cautiousness, not a coldness so much as a distance, even when followed by curiosity. Sometimes I forget I'm wearing it, I don't wear a kippah all the time, and I'll have a strange interaction only later to hear the question at the end of the conversation about the kippah or Judaism, or I'll reach up to scratch an itch and the pad of my finger will press against the crochet. Or maybe it's as simple as that I feel separate, that no one else is treating me differently, or thinking otherwise about me, but I am. That I am imposing that distance because of the difference that I feel from the national majority.

There is something deeply biological about categorization, about the process of arranging our books by subject, alphabetizing our contacts and separating the food on our plate. To the one extreme is a compulsiveness, losing the content in the form, but even the least organized among us is capable of discerning most categories, that the

choice could be made to separate the big cars from the trucks, and the shirts from the jackets and so on. Whether we chose to act on it or not, the thought is there.

And that is why the thought is likely to occur in any one of us when we see someone who has any features that differ from our own. Whether conscious or subconscious our mind registers that there is a human being in front of us, not a dog or a cat, and gathers information about that person from what is available. They have a high-pitched voice, they are dressed in jeans and yes, their skin is this color. It would be nice to say that the information comes without any further effect, simply that our minds register it and move on but I find that highly unlikely. Every one of us is constantly gathering information that tells us how best to interact with the person in front of us. Every piece of information comes together to instruct our next actions. For example, the fact that I am much smaller and housed behind a plastic screen hopefully tells you that I am not actually standing in front of you. You can talk to me, but I wouldn't recommend it, I can't reciprocate. And so you place me in a myriad of categories, perhaps among others you have recently seen on the same screen, or despite looking dissimilar, having separate features, and I assure you being quite different, for everyone listening I am now channeling every clergyperson you have ever heard speak. When we have a conversation with another person, we place them in every category we have available.

We often tell ourselves that we see everyone as the same. In the hopes that we might treat every person with the same love and kindness we gloss over the real differences between people. It's a beautiful goal but it can be misleading, we are not perfect, and our assumptions and relationships carry with them unfair and preconceived biases (buy-us-siz). It's not possible to forget the previous experiences we have had with other people that we associate with an individual, even if we are meeting them for the first time. Seeing a parent care for their child will always, on some level, bring memories of our own parents or children, these are the associations that we have, the memories that are deeply rooted in us, and the blessing and curse of living in a society with other

people. We will attempt to know someone by drawing conclusions about who they are before they have the opportunity to tell us.

It is the task of each and every one of us not to pretend that these conclusions don't exist, but to hold them, examine them, and recognize how they change the way we act toward another person. Knowing what painful or powerful experiences in the past cloud our judgement counterintuitively will help us keep a more open mind about the people in front of us. By seeing color, gender, any number of things, we help dissolve the undue influence they may have over us.

Teshuvah anticipates this, we recognize that we are not perfect, that we all have ways to grow, and next year's Yom Kippur is set on the calendar long before the hours of the new year have clicked by, because we know that we are going to act wrongly. This is the task of the High Holy Days, to take the time to learn about ourselves, to consider, identify and recognize who we are so that we can learn to act differently or simply with more awareness. It is possible to be out of touch with our own feelings, our own thoughts, even inevitable, we run through the fast pace of the world without the time to reflect, understand and eventually make meaning. The High Holy Days are the time to take a step back and review those feelings, those thoughts. We can't grow if we don't learn and despite what might be best for ourselves and others we will act on what we don't know.

In the Jewish community we have a tendency to be "Ashkenormative," assuming that Jews are predominantly from Eastern Europe, white-looking faces and stereotyped names. And it makes sense, the largest migration of Jews to the United States was the over 2.5 million Jews who fled Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20th century.¹ The majority of Jews in the US fit this category, but we of all people, a community not only

¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-emigration-in-the-19th-century/>

rich with many different histories but one that proudly identifies itself with the non-majority, should know that any community is chok full of different people, and made richer for that diversity. Now it needs to be said that Temple Israel is the most diverse Jewish community I have ever been a part of. This seems to be something this community has either intuited or lived for so long that I debated the value of bringing this conversation up at all, this community loves regardless of color. And so I invite us to continue to celebrate the diversity of Jews in our community, we are latinx, black, arab, asian, white, brown and every color. //

Martin Buber was a fascinating man. Born into a prominent Jewish family in Austria he wandered through a number of Jewish projects throughout his life, identifying, celebrating and inventing the vibrant Jewish expressions of his day emerging as a folklorist, a Bible scholar, and translator. But his biggest task was the exploration of spirituality. What is the experience of God, he wondered, of holiness? And what are the elements of our meaningful moments? He wrote a number of works on the subject, and perhaps the most popular is the book *I and Thou*. A number of themes emerge from his work and one of them is the role of relationships in the life of the spirit. For Buber, there are many paths to the Divine, many different ways that we experience that sense of something greater, but the most profound is in the pathway of one another, and so he lays out his framework for "I-it" and "I-thou." Buber writes that we find our way to the Divine through depth of relationship, the "I-it" is simply our operational relationship, the things we have to do, our conversation with the cashier at the store, not a deeply meaningful interaction, although with quarantine for many of us it is now elevated, we crave human contact, which is why the next level of relationship is the "I-Thou," the holy relationship between two people. The profound moments in our lives where we connect with another person in such a way that we experience the Divine. When we reach beyond what is immediately there and experience something greater. Buber, reflecting on the power of the encounter, the "divine electricity" as he calls it, notes that recognizing the individual, their difference and uniqueness is a critical part of what

makes that encounter. He writes, "Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique. It is the duty of every person in Israel to know and consider that he is unique in the world in his particular character, and that there has never been someone like him before. For if there had been someone like him before, there would be no need for him to be in the world."²

Here Buber reveals something profound, not only about the importance of our interaction with each other but the nature of it as well, the various things that make someone an individual, inside and out are a critical part of the encounter, a full level of the way that we build a relationship with another person is the in the things that allow us to see them as an individual. While being mindful of the way difference can sway our outlook on another person that same difference can enrich the connection, it's something to be celebrated.

We often wonder about how we can treat everyone the same, how we can offer fairness in a society that craves equality and so plainly lacks it. I'd like to suggest that, we can take a step forward in this by recognizing that each person has their own history, their own needs and own wants, and their own relationship with us. When we can recognize the differences we see in each other, the ways that we all add a different color to our society and this world, then we can treat one another the same, that is recognize that each person brings their own gifts, and love each of those gifts and each person for the particular way we shine.

These High Holy Days, may we understand better the way we see ourselves, and the way we see each other. Shannah Tovah

² The Way of Man, p16