

What is a Person?

I won't give a definitive answer to this question tonight, many theologians, psychologists and AI experts are working on it as we speak.

But tonight, as we are in the middle of the Three weeks, and entering the month of Av next Fri. I'll talk for a while about one aspect of personhood, and even try and connect it with our Parasha for this week. We are going to take time now to think about our "inner Troll".

*"Troll [and I'm quoting now from the book **"You are not a gadget"** by Jaron Lanier] is a term for an anonymous person who is abusive in an online environment. It would be nice to believe that there is only a minute troll population living among us. But in fact, a great many people have experienced being drawn into nasty exchanges online. Everyone who has experienced this has been introduced to his or her inner troll. "*

The key word here is **anonymous**, that is [and I'm quoting again] *"troll evoking design is effortless, consequence-free, transient anonymity in the service of a goal, such as promoting a point of view, that stands entirely apart from one's identity or personality...."*

To bring out our inner troll we need to have a setting which allows for a feeling of non-accountability on the one hand, and a deep drive to have our opinion or ideology heard. This is a fascinating combination that can teach us quite a bit about human online interaction, that is, about so much of human interaction nowadays when so much of our lives are moving online. It's interesting to notice that when Lanier is talking about trollism, he is referring also to the design of the different sites, and sees some of them as being more prone to induce troll like reactions from people, while others less. We find here a combination between our inner

human tendencies, and the platform, or social structure in which we interact with other people. If I were to try and give this “troll” a Jewish name, we could then easily use the word “*Yetzer Ha’Rah*” [the inclination to do bad]. The *Yetzer Ha’Rah* in Jewish thought, is not an external voice enticing us to do absolute evil. Rather, it is those moments when our judgment is distorted and we think we are doing “for others” when we are actually doing “for ourselves”. At the center of this lies an understanding that in order to be attuned to “*Yetzer Ha’Tov*” [the inclination to do good] we need to recognize the humanity of those in front of us. Even when we disagree with them, even when they scare us.

This week’s Torah portion is Pinchas, but the story of Pinchas happens in last week’s portion. It’s interesting that the name of our Parasha is Pinchas, and most of the **new** information we receive about this murderous story relates to the names of the two people murdered by Pinchas:

*“The name of the Israelite who was killed, the one who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, chieftain of a Simeonite ancestral house. The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi daughter of Zur; he was the tribal head of an ancestral house in Midian.”*  
(*Bamidbar 25:14-15*)

Their names appear right after Adonai blesses Pinchas and rewards him for his actions “*Say therefore, I grant him My covenant of peace;*”. And when we ask, why is a covenant of Peace the reward for slaying people, some of our tradition claims that this reward was also a sort of Limmud [teaching] for Pinchas and his family [Let’s also recall that Pinchas is a descendant of Levi. The same Levi who, with his brother Shimeon, slaughtered all the men of Shchem after the rape of their sister Dinah. Extra zeal runs in the family]. I would like to add that part of the Limmud we are all given in

this story is that those murdered people had an identity. It's interesting to think if Zimri and Cozbi realised people would recognize them when they went and acted out their protest? In all of the multitudes, did any of these people think they would be afforded a cloak of anonymity?

Our parasha wants to teach us that no. Real humans have real interactions, and when we react to another person - on or off line, we should always be aware of the impact our words have on the human on the other side of our screen.

The degrees of anonymity which online interaction afford us, create in us the illusion that if I can pretend it's not the "real me" over here, then also those I'm talking to are not real.

But we are (for the time being), all real people in these interactions.

In these weeks building up to 9th of Av, when we remember the destruction of the temple (Mikdash), we can take some to think of the Temple of human relationships and community being shaken in the last decades.

As we approach the month of Av next week, we should think of all those places where we bring our "inner troll" to interaction with other people, all those places where our *Yetzer Ha'ra* makes us believe we are doing for others when actually feeding our own insecure ego.

A true rebuilding of a contemporary Mikdash, would be our ability to recreate a braver society of true interaction: Yetzer Ha'Tov to Yetzer Ha'Tov, person to person, human to human.

Shabbat Shalom.