

# From Optimism to Activism

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**P'shat- טשט**

**D'rash- דרש**

**You and I** - What is the significance of having a partner? In the Garden of Eden, Adam was created by himself, but soon God created for/of him a partner. "And the Lord God said: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helpmate opposite him.'" (Genesis 2:18) Rashi, the premiere Medieval commentary, quotes the Midrash and Talmud in explaining the meaning of "a helpmate opposite him". If he is worthy, she will be a helpmate. If he is not worthy, she will be against him, to fight him (Genesis Rabbah 17:3 and Yevamot 63a). Having a helpmate supports one's efforts. We learn in the Midrash, "Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said, 'Just as a knife can be sharpened only on the side of another, so a disciple of a sage improves only with his fellow.'" (Genesis Rabbah 69:2) It is through partnership that we are able to be our best and do the most good for the world.

**change the world**- How could two people change the world? *Rashi* interprets the verse, "You shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24) to mean in the form of a newborn child, two parents literally become one flesh of the child. In light of this, perhaps **אני ואתה** - You and I can be interpreted as a love song.

**then everyone will come** - When the nation of Israel was caught between the sea and Pharaoh's advancing army, it was not a group of people that saved the Israelites. In the Talmud we learn that, "Each tribe was unwilling to be the first to enter the sea. Then sprang forward Nachshon the son of Amminadav and descended first into the sea". (Sotah 37a) And when Nachshon went in, the sea split and the Israelites were saved. In this case the world was changed through the agency of one person. Though the group was not taking action collectively, Nachshon took the initiative to jump into the sea, and his bravery allowed the entire nation to pass through the split sea. **Others have said it before**- "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9) Despite our best efforts and optimism nothing ever changes. There have been people before us who also wished to see change. **It does not matter**- Does saying "it does not matter" run the risk of ignoring the reality of life's obstacles and challenges? The Talmud relates a story about Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Eleazar who ran away from the government who wanted to kill them. At first they hid in the House of Study and then later they hid in a miraculous cave. After twelve years Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son emerged from the cave only to be dissatisfied with the behavior of their fellow Jews. "Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burnt up. Thereupon a Heavenly Voice came forth and cried out, 'Have you emerged to destroy My world: Return to your cave!' So they returned and dwelled there [in the cave another] twelve months, saying, 'The punishment of the wicked in *Gehenna*- purgatory is limited to twelve months.' A Heavenly Voice then came forth and said, 'Go forth from your cave!' Thus.; they issued: wherever Rabbi Eleazar wounded [burned up] Rabbi Shimon healed. Said he [Rabbi Shimon] to him [Rabbi Eleazar], 'My son! You and I are sufficient for the world.'" (Shabbat 33b) This story tells us of two people who wanted to ignore the obstacles and challenges of the world. It's important to form a dynamic partnership between people who are uncompromising and idealistic like Rabbi Eleazar and someone grounded and practical like Rabbi Shimon. To bring peace to the world having a balanced partnership is not just sufficient, it is necessary. **will try from the beginning** The nature of our humanity is that we seek to defy death. It is as if we are always reaching out for **עץ החיים** the Tree of Life which we lost access to when Adam and Eve ate from **עץ הדעת** the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. Einstein says that starting from the beginning "יהיה לנו רע" - will be bad for us." We might try to get back into the Garden of Eden, but we are reminded that we already know the taste of good and bad and that getting back to the beginning might be beyond our reach. **change the world** - Why is this belief that we can change the world repeated so many times? Einstein was from Israel's Greatest Generation that built the county. We are reminded that the move from optimism to activism is itself an iterative process.

to the beginning. How do we become righteous? The Torah tells us, "See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and bad." (Deuteronomy 30:15) But as we know, just because it might be clear what we ought to do it does not make it easy to do it. We are not angels; it is in our nature to be self-serving and to live with the temptation to not do the right thing for the world. Even if we cannot achieve it every time, we must always strive to be righteous in our deeds. Renowned psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl wrote, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." (Man's Search for Meaning). How do we prepare ourselves for this human freedom? It is Einstein's music, and not just his words, that stick in our heads and motivate us to make the right choices. Einstein is inviting us to sing along with him and cultivate a positive attitude and develop habits of righteousness. **Others have said it before** - Tisha B'Av (lit. "the ninth of Av") is an annual fast day commemorating the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem and our subsequent exile from Israel. According to tradition this day was started due to the sin of the twelve spies (Mishnah Taanit 4:6). The Israelites wept over the false report of the ten spies and in turn this day has become a day of weeping and misfortune. In his amazing book *Em HaBanim Semeichah* Rabbi Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal refutes the anti-Zionism of his Satmar Hungarian Orthodox upbringing and beautifully lays out a vision of redemption realized in a Jewish State of Israel. There he writes, "Our mentor, the Ari z"l, revealed to his disciple, Rabbi Chayim Vital z"l, that when one chooses a mitzvah for which a certain *tzaddik* sacrificed himself, the soul of that *tzaddik* comes to his aid. The author of *Midrash Shmuel* once entered the study hall and [the soul of] the Ari HaKadosh stood before him, as is well known. The same is true today. Yehoshua and Calev sacrificed themselves for *aliyah*. The entire Jewish nation wanted to stone them, but they said, Let us go up (Numbers 13:30). Similarly, if we sacrifice ourselves for *aliyah*, the souls of Yehoshua and Calev will come to our aid. This is as clear and true as the Torah of Moshe from the Almighty". (*Em HaBanim Semeichah*) Who are the others who have said it before? The partnership was none other than Yehoshua and Calev. For most of Jewish history we have lamented our having ignored these voices. On one level Einstein is urging us to move past the tragedy of the spies to have hope. On another level he is inviting us to move past the idea of just having *Hatikva*- hoping for 2000 years. The Modern Jewish State is not just a dream. **אני ואתה** - You and I - is a call to action. Will we answer the call and move from optimism to activism?

**You and I** - What did Einstein mean when he wrote **אני ואתה** - You and I? Perhaps it is just the Hebrew translation of the Jewish Philosopher Martin Buber's idea of *Ich und Du*- I and Thou. Buber wrote, "Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love. That is no metaphor, but the actual truth. Love does not cling to the I in such a way as to have the Thou only for its "content," its object; but love is between I and Thou. The man who does not know this, with his very being know this, does not know love; even though he ascribes to it the feelings he lives through, experiences, enjoys, and expresses." (I and Thou) Life is not just about experience and sensation, rather life finds its meaningfulness in relationships. The attitude of the "I" towards "Thou" is a relationship in which the other is not separated by discrete bounds. Bad things happen in society when we objectify each other. It is only through the **אני ואתה** I-Thou relationship that we can hope to see positive social change. **change the world**- *Rashi* interprets the verse, "You shall become one flesh" to mean in the

newborn child. This seems to be validated in the Mishnah where we learn, "Therefore, humans were created singly, to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul, Scripture accounts it as if he had destroyed a full world; and whoever saves one soul, Scripture accounts it as if she had saved a full world." (Sanhedrin 4:5) But there are many other ways to save peoples' lives and change the world. There are many ways activists can bring about positive change. The bad news is that the world is broken in many ways. The good news is that collectively we have all the tools to fix it. The question is if we are appropriately utilizing everyone's unique skills, passions,

and talents to do the holy work of making the world a better place. **then everyone will come** -Is it possible that Nachshon is exceptional? It is popularly understood that we need large groups of people to make change in the world. About this idea the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." In terms of bringing about change, quality is more important than quantity, but we always benefit from partnership and support. If people lead effectively others will follow. It seems that even before the leadership is realized the followers are there. It is as Maimonides writes, "The masses were created in order to form a society for the wise men, so that they will not be alone... What is the meaning of, *For this is man's entire duty* (Ecclesiastes 12:13)? The entire world was created to accompany the righteous one (Berachot 6b), meaning, to eliminate his sadness and aloneness" (Introduction to the Mishnah) Effective leaders push the group to move forward, but they are not effective when they get too far ahead of their group. Transformative leaders can take a group of individuals and help the group become a community which is unified without having to be uniform. In light of Maimonides we can say that effective leadership causes the leader and the group to be identified at the same time. **It will be bad for us**- To lead is to live dangerously. On this Harvard's Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky write, "Successful leaders manage conflict; they don't shy away from it or suppress it but see it as an engine of creativity and innovation. Some of the most creative ideas come out of people in conflict remaining in conversation with one another rather than flying into their own corners or staking out entrenched positions. The challenge for leaders is to develop structures and processes in which such conflicts can be orchestrated productively." (Leadership on the Line) Einstein is not ignoring the risk of leadership; he is just saying that it should not deter us from making progress. In light of the risks of leadership where does Einstein get his unshaken sense of optimism? Maybe we have no choice. The British author G.K. Chesterton wrote, "The paradox is that man must be a little careless of his life in order to keep it." **will try from the beginning**- We read at the end of Lamentations, "Restore us to You, God, that we may return; renew our days as of old" (Lamentations 5:21) What does it mean to go back to the beginning? We learn in the Talmud, "Bar-Kappara expounded: The work of the righteous is greater than the work of heaven and earth." (Ketuvot 5a) Thus we see that the deeds of a righteous person are tantamount to the creation of the world. Doing good works in itself might be a way for us to reenact creation and bring us back

to the beginning. How do we become righteous? The Torah tells us, "See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and bad." (Deuteronomy 30:15) But as we know, just because it might be clear what we ought to do it does not make it easy to do it. We are not angels; it is in our nature to be self-serving and to live with the temptation to not do the right thing for the world. Even if we cannot achieve it every time, we must always strive to be righteous in our deeds. Renowned psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl wrote, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." (Man's Search for Meaning). How do we prepare ourselves for this human freedom? It is Einstein's music, and not just his words, that stick in our heads and motivate us to make the right choices. Einstein is inviting us to sing along with him and cultivate a positive attitude and develop habits of righteousness. **Others have said it before** - Tisha B'Av (lit. "the ninth of Av") is an annual fast day commemorating the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem and our subsequent exile from Israel. According to tradition this day was started due to the sin of the twelve spies (Mishnah Taanit 4:6). The Israelites wept over the false report of the ten spies and in turn this day has become a day of weeping and misfortune. In his amazing book *Em HaBanim Semeichah* Rabbi Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal refutes the anti-Zionism of his Satmar Hungarian Orthodox upbringing and beautifully lays out a vision of redemption realized in a Jewish State of Israel. There he writes, "Our mentor, the Ari z"l, revealed to his disciple, Rabbi Chayim Vital z"l, that when one chooses a mitzvah for which a certain *tzaddik* sacrificed himself, the soul of that *tzaddik* comes to his aid. The author of *Midrash Shmuel* once entered the study hall and [the soul of] the Ari HaKadosh stood before him, as is well known. The same is true today. Yehoshua and Calev sacrificed themselves for *aliyah*. The entire Jewish nation wanted to stone them, but they said, Let us go up (Numbers 13:30). Similarly, if we sacrifice ourselves for *aliyah*, the souls of Yehoshua and Calev will come to our aid. This is as clear and true as the Torah of Moshe from the Almighty". (*Em HaBanim Semeichah*) Who are the others who have said it before? The partnership was none other than Yehoshua and Calev. For most of Jewish history we have lamented our having ignored these voices. On one level Einstein is urging us to move past the tragedy of the spies to have hope. On another level he is inviting us to move past the idea of just having *Hatikva*- hoping for 2000 years. The Modern Jewish State is not just a dream. **אני ואתה** - You and I - is a call to action. Will we answer the call and move from optimism to activism?