

*THE GOD PARTICLE*  
AUGUST 3, 2012

Before I begin, I would first like to thank the entire CBB community for welcoming me with open arms and for all of your support over the last three weeks. I can honestly say that while there are many people that I still have yet to meet—it already feels like home! It is truly an honor to be a part of this community and I want to thank the Rabbi, Cantor and the entire CBB staff for making me feel a part of the team. Also, a tremendous thanks to all of the board members here—past and present who spend countless hours building this community, and especially to immediate Past President Daniel Hochman and new President Hallie Avolio. And for all of those who I have not had the chance to meet, I hope you will come and introduce yourself to me—and even better, if you have a havurah, I am happy to attend an event, or if you would like to meet with me one on one, my door is always open!

Since moving to Santa Barbara, I have started reading the Santa Barbara Independent to get a taste for the town. A couple of weeks ago, the cover of the paper caught my attention, which read: “Deep Inside UCSB’s Quest to Discover the God Particle.” Being a rabbi, anytime I see the word GOD in a secular newspaper, I figure it is worth a look! But as soon as I started reading the article, I realized that this amazing discovery was just a bit out of my depth of field as someone who never quite went past high school physics.

But what I can say is that the article honored a handful of researchers and engineers at UCSB—one of whom happens to be a member of our congregation—Dr. Jeff Richman. This group of scientists is being credited with one of the most important inventions that have been created in this field since the 1980s. To quote Dr. Richman—this discovery “explains an enormous amount about the structure and properties of matter—and how mass originates.” The

detector measures the energy that is created when literally-- millions upon millions of protons are accelerated at the speed of light. The collision that occurs is as close as scientists can get to approximating what happened during the Big Bang. Hence-- the “God particle.”

Originally, this term was coined by Nobel Prize winner Leon Lederman when he published a book by the same name in 2006. But Dr. Richman assures me that most scientists in the field rarely, if ever, actually call this discovery the God particle. To learn more about the hard and fast science of it all, I believe that Dr. Richman has been invited to speak here at CBB and I encourage you all to join us for that upcoming event.

But putting aside the science of it all, I want to focus tonight on the name—“the God *particle*.” In many ways I believe that this name underscores a bigger trend in the modern world. For many of us, myself included, God (and by extension religion) has become relegated to one tiny aspect of our lives—a particle one might even say...a sliver of time, space or energy that is devoted to being “Jewish” or doing “Jewish” things. For some that means attending services, for others it’s about celebrating the holidays or sending your kids to religious school. And for countless others, it means setting aside each Sunday to have bagels and lox with your family or friends.

But I would argue that for most of us—even those of us sitting here today—Judaism still remains a small part of what we do or who we are on a daily basis. Certainly this was the case for me growing up as a child in Minnesota. While we always celebrated the High Holidays, Hanukah, and Passover, Judaism always felt like something that I did on Sundays. When my parents moved to St. Louis Park in the 1970s, it was a bastion of the Jewish community and most, if not all, of the Jewish kids went public school. But by the time I reached Middle School, I was one of only a few Jewish kids in my entire grade who were at the public school. Therefore it

was simply easier for me to fit in so I traded in my Jewish identity in favor of being a “normal” blonde-haired, blue-eyed Midwesterner like all of my friends.

But my childhood desire to pass came crashing to a halt one fateful night on January 9, 1993. While attending my brother's hockey game, fans from the opposing team entered the arena with huge, white boxes and handed them to their kids. All of a sudden we were being bombarded with bagels and pennies while they chanted my town's name with one striking alteration: “St. Jewish Park...St. Jewish Park.” While no one was physically injured, this bagel incident left an indelible mark on my psyche—and as a 13 year old, it was quite a traumatic event. Growing up in America, I believed that we were well beyond blatant acts of anti-Semitism. And yet, 50 years after my grandfather had fled from Germany before WWII, there I was—standing in a heap of bagels.

As a result of this experience, I declared at my Bat Mitzvah a few months later that I would not become a “true daughter of the commandments” until I had done my part to turn fear into understanding, and understanding into stronger, more empathetic communities. Little did I know that the age of 13, I had literally found my calling in life.

For the past ten years I have been striving to transform this vision into a reality through my work as a community organizer. Between graduating from Brandeis University and applying to rabbinical school, I worked in the non-profit sector as a community organizer on living wage campaigns, universal health care, and even a Care-Taker's campaign in Arizona. Whether I was aware of it or not, all of my actions were inspired by my desire to see that no one-- no matter what race, religion, or creed—would have to feel the way I felt the day those bagels came flying at me and my family. However, after working 60-80 hours a week, for months at a time, my body literally sent me a message—enough! After a brief spell in the hospital in my mid-twenties

I quickly realized that my current lifestyle was unsustainable. I had tried yoga and meditation but nothing seemed to work. At that very same time, I witnessed something that I had never seen before in the organized Jewish community. Synagogues in Boston were taking on *long-term, systemic social justice campaigns* through the joint effort of rabbis and lay leaders.

In addition to feeding the homeless, they were working to create job training programs throughout the city. While tutoring kids in low-income communities, they were also creating thoughtful relationships with their senators to work on educational reform. And all the while, they were doing it within a Jewish framework that teaches us if you want to heal the world you must also work to heal yourself and the community. This is known as balancing the desire for Tikkun Olam (healing the world) with Tikkun HaNefesh (healing the self/soul). And there it was, for the first time in my life I realized that the rabbinate would allow me to combine my passion for social justice with my desire to create stronger, more empathetic communities that could combine internal healing with external healing.

After five years of rabbinical school, and after pouring over hundreds if not thousands of texts, I can honestly say is that what I admire the most about our tradition is that it does not prioritize internal healing over external healing or vice versa. Instead, our tradition teaches us that they must go hand in hand—with equal care and compassion. If we only focus on our own well-being—we are destined to disappoint those around us. And if we only focus on helping others, we will fail to reach our own potential.

However, if you walked into any synagogue in the country and you asked them what is the most important lesson in Judaism is...they are likely to quote Rabbi Hillel's famous line from the Talmud (Shabbat 31): *"That which is hateful to you, do not do unto others."*

But here, I will respectfully, and very humbly disagree with one of the greatest Rabbinic sages of all time because I would argue that it is not enough to “*do no harm.*” Instead, I believe that what Judaism is really about—what is at the heart of our faith—is that in order to bring about peace and redemption each one of us must GIVE to the world as much as we TAKE from it.

And here, I mean giving in the broadest sense-- giving of our time, resources, money, skills, love or empathy. It’s about looking around at our relationships—with your primary partner, your friends, your family, and your community and assessing for yourself: “How much energy do I spend giving to them and how much energy do I spend taking of their time, their resources, etc.” And then we must ask ourselves, are we in equilibrium? And if not, what will it take to get there? Because this balance—starting on an individual level and working outwards to the world at large—is what I believe will ultimately lead us closer to a world filled with peace and harmony.

That being said, attaining a balance between GIVING and TAKING should not look like a tally board. It’s not about—you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours. It’s also not about thinking to yourself, “Well I did a really, really nice thing for him and he never returned the favor,” because this mentality is too simplistic and it ignores a fundamental concept within our tradition. As it says in this week’s Torah portion, Deuteronomy Chapter 5 verse 2:

ב יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, כָּרַת עִמָּנוּ  
בְּרִית--בְּחֹרֵב. 2 Adonai our God made a  
covenant with us in Horeb.

ג לֹא אֶת-אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, כָּרַת יְהוָה  
אֶת-הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת: כִּי אַתֶּמֶן,  
אֲנִיחֶנּוּ אֵלֶּה פֶּה הַיּוֹם כִּלְנֹו 3 Not only with our forefathers  
(and mothers) but with (all of  
us) who are here on this day.

## תּוֹרָה.

As a people—for all generations-- we are connected to one another through a covenant. And a covenant is different than a contract. A contract is about agreeing to do something in return for *x,y,or z* in return. A covenantal relationship is about doing something for someone else without knowing how, when, where or why you will be repaid for your generosity-- it is a relationship forged into an unknown future.

In this week's Torah portion we are introduced—for the first time—to what would become one of the most well known prayers in all of Jewish history—the Shemah. But many scholars have asked, why did this line from the Torah become a prayer? A prayer is usually about praising God, or asking something from God. But the Shemah is not even addressed to God, it is addressed to the Jewish people. So how did it become the quintessential Jewish prayer?

While there are many answers to this question, I would like to leave you with one interpretation that I find particularly compelling in light of this conversation about GIVING and TAKING. Torah scholars have noted that the Shemah is actually grammatically incorrect. The word Shemah is a singular verb, but it is meant to address a collective noun—the people of Israel. So if it were grammatically correct, it should read: SHIM'U ISRAEL.

But the Rabbis teach that there are no “accidental mistakes” in the Torah. Rather, every grammatical inconsistency is a life lesson waiting to be found. And here I would like to suggest that this week's lesson is that we must balance our individual desires (Shema) with our communal needs (Yisrael).

Traditionally the Shema is recited by singing the first line at the top of our lungs—and the second line we are taught to say in a whisper. While the Rabbis explain this custom and

many different ways—I would like to offer my own, modern midrash or interpretation—This prayer—which we ideally recite three times a day—is constant reminder that we must ...listen as much as we talk—give as much as we take—and love as much as we are loved. It is upon this balance that the WATCHWARD of our faith truly stands. In conclusion, I believe that by embodying this complex ethic of care that we can transform the notion of a “God particle” into a *truly holy universe*.