

CIRCLES

By Rabbi Baruch Cohon

Take a look at your life. Chances are you surround yourself with certain people, or they surround you whether you choose them or not.

Wherever you stand, you are at the center of your own reality. Closest to you are your immediate family members – parents, spouse, children. Brothers and sisters too, when you are young. Some siblings retain that closeness all through life. Call them all Circle number one.

Just outside of them stand your friends, those who share your time at work or at play or just because you have a lot of common interests or memories. One or two of them might even move into the immediate family circle, but for now let's leave them in circle number two.

Standing in the third circle could be your extended family. You don't see them often, but if they need you or you need them, you know they are out there. This circle might include brothers and sisters if you and they drifted apart.

Circle number four is your community. Neighbors, acquaintances, co-religionists both local and worldwide. The block where you live, the city that collects your taxes and your trash, and the people who share that city. If you are Jewish, this circle could include members of your congregation. It also includes Israel and fellow Jews in other parts of the world – one people. Are you a joiner? If so, other groups could feed into this circle, like your club, your lodge, your team, your sorority/fraternity, your veteran's organization, your union, your political party. Larger or smaller, it's your community.

Circle number five is your country. People who live in other countries have their own attitudes towards them, and they are entitled to those feelings. If you are American, you have a special connection to this land of the free and the brave. You might agree or disagree with government policy at any time, but it's your country and always will be.

And the outermost circle, surrounding all the rest, is the human race. We all share the planet. We all share mortality. Even when we attack each other, even though we plot and plan and mobilize to destroy each other, we have to know that we share a common fate. And we also share our ignorance. Not one of us can be sure of what happens after we die. Not one of us can get up in the morning and guarantee that we will live to go to bed that night.

Six circles, concentric and yet connected. What's missing from these circles? First and foremost comes the G-d question. Where is the Almighty in this geometric consciousness of ours? As I see it, He is above us all and with us all. The wisest among us acknowledge and celebrate His inspiration, in thought or in ceremony. Some people choose to ignore the Divine presence. That does not mean He is absent.

Second comes the love question. Are you really alone in the center of the circles? What if you have a Beloved? Well, say you are a young man and you find the one-and-only marvelous girl to share your life, and you give her a ring that is itself a perfect circle – no beginning and no end, as you want your love to be perfect and endless. Then you bring her into a ceremony called a wedding. Love songs and folklore describe it as “making the two of us one.” That's fiction. In Yiddish, a *bubbe maiseh* – Grandma's tall tale. Getting married does not end your individuality. Having performed many weddings, I can tell you that at best a wedding signifies taking two individual pasts and blending them into what is hoped will be a mutual future. Sometimes that doesn't work. But sometimes it does. Let's say you and she have a great marriage, with children and a loving home that you share. So is she in circle #1 or in the center with you? The real answer is Both. There are times when your lives totally merge. There are other times when you have to face yourself, deal with your own faults and failures, and challenge yourself. Alone. No matter how close you and your wife may be. Look in the bathroom mirror at those times, and you'll see just one face.

Of course, disagreement and attack can happen in any of the circles. Any or all of the circles can include enemies now and then. Keeps life interesting. But also colors and discolors some valuable relationships. On the other hand, when those relationships are strong enough they can survive and even mediate disagreements and attacks. I feel grateful for all my concentric circles. I know they are there, day in and day out.

That is why my favorite prayer is contained in just four Hebrew words: *Baruch haShem yom yom* – **Bless G-d for every day.**

The Almighty surrounded me with all these wonderful concentric circles but the center belongs to me, and He is there with me.

With you too.