

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

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Scene One: I am walking alone down a quiet street. It is late at night and there are only a few people out. I cut through an alley to get where I'm going. I see at the end of the short block a man in a hoodie. I slow down. He is Black, walking alone...toward me. The flurry of natural self-preservation reflexes fire inside - despite myself. Within the time warp of a single heartbeat, I debate racism, examine my prejudices, and assure myself that I still want to be safe. Then I notice that he is carrying a gun. Immediately I start feeling more relaxed. I smile and say, "Ma shlomcha? How are you? As he passes, he says, "Bseder gamor habibi." Just fine, my friend.

When we see, do we really understand? How often do our assumptions blind us? How often do we examine our implicit biases?

When I was in that alley this past February, I was in Jerusalem. Any person carrying a gun in Israel is in the IDF, the Israeli army, off duty but required to carry their weapon. The irony that seeing a weapon helped me feel more safe being along with a stranger who was Black, in this case an Ethiopian Jew, was not lost on me.

Scene Two: The story is told of the famous Sherlock Holmes and his trusted aide Watson who had to leave London en route to solve a particularly difficult case in the North. They were travelling by horse-drawn wagon when night fell and it was time to set up camp on the road. They erected a tent, ate dinner, and the two turned in for the night. In the middle of the night, Sherlock Holmes awoke with a start and looked about. He nudged Watson out of a deep sleep and said, "My dear Watson—Look about you and tell me what you see." Watson, rubbing his eyes and allowing them to adjust to the darkness gazed up into the heavens and replied, "Well, Sir, I see planets and stars, I see distant galaxies, I see the transcendence of the universe and the majesty of eternity." Sherlock Holmes replied, "Watson, precisely. Someone has stolen our tent."¹

Scene Three: In Genesis, chapter 21, Sarah and Abraham banish Hagar with her son Ishmael. This chapter is the Torah reading today in Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, while our reading of chapter 22, the binding of Isaac, will be chanted tomorrow on their second day of Rosh Hashanah. Our machzor *Mishkan Hanefesh* now includes Genesis 21 as an optional Torah reading.

Hagar and Ishmael head into the wilderness. Soon Ishmael is near death from lack of water and, in her distress, Hagar no longer can see what is before her. She abandons Ishmael, but then, "God opens her eyes and she [sees] a well of water." Hagar's suffering did not allow her to see the well that was always there.

When it comes to overcoming adversity, we need either more miracles or better deductions. And God knows, we could use both.

¹ Story as told by Rabbi Rafi Rank.

Over this past year, how many days did you wake up to challenging headline after challenging headline and how many times get enraged or scared and react without slowing down to see if you were really seeing the full picture?

It certainly has been a crazy year, one that has been emotionally draining. From politics to the police to platforms, there are so many issues where we are taking up sides. Too often we don't see fully because of some distress that polarizes our position. We over speak, misdiagnose, generalize, and stay within our own myopic Facebook world, often ignoring complexities and the possibility, the true possibility, that there is another way to view the situation.

Some positions are simply right like the fact that another person's skin color does not determine whether you are safe or not, that a naïve misdiagnosis of a stolen tent can be dangerous, that lack of water for a dying child is a horrific situation to imagine and must be addressed as the top priority. But even in these moments, we can miss the bigger picture of how we ended up in that situation. We sometimes jump to solutions before we understand. When we listen to other people even when it is hard or painful even when their slogans or one-liners are not ours, we may learn that there is a part of the picture we missed. When we find ways for respectful conversation, people have the safety to back away from the extremes. This is the only way to heal the polarization in our country. It is too easy to accentuate difference in debate without discovering what is in common. If we hear with compassion, with what King Solomon called a "listening heart", we will understand why some people are motivated more by fear and some more by love.

Unless we do, those fears and those loves can be manipulated by demagogues or by prophets. And God knows, we are witnessing that now.

When I was in Israel for a couple weeks in February as part of my sabbatical, I spent a day studying at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem with Yossi Klein Halevi. Halevi is the author of *Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation* and *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*. He taught that people on the right and on the left talk over each other because they don't fundamentally see the principles in each other's positions.

Some people are more drawn to the human need for self-preservation, a principled position of pointing out the reality of enemies and terrorism. They "see" that some Minneapolis Somalis have joined Al-Shabaab and a Somali was behind an attack at a St. Cloud mall, that violent crime rates in the Black community are higher than in the white, that Arab countries have manipulated the Palestinians by keeping them as refugees and a pawn in the conflict with Israel, that Iran is taking advantage of the West and is bent on Israel's destruction. To sum up this view in a Jewish context, Halevi argues, these people find meaning in the holiday of Purim, its story of real enemies bent on the destruction of the Jews, fighting back, and its message of "Don't be naïve."

Others do not spend their energies focused on these threats because they are more drawn to the human need for justice, that our purpose in life is to bring out the values, in our Jewish

language, of having been slaves in Egypt, of all being created in the Divine image, of wanting to perfect the world. They “see” immigrant communities struggling to become American and survive economically just as we had generations ago, they see nearly the entirety of the Muslim Somali community denouncing terror, the grossly disproportionate number of Black men stopped by the police and too many killed in situations that could have been deescalated, the devastating impact of Israeli occupation on Palestinians for now almost 50 years since the 6th day war, the grace of détente between Iran and the West. In the Jewish context, these people find meaning in the holiday of Passover, its story of freedom and its message of “Be not brutal.”

Of course *both* Purim and Passover are central Jewish holidays. Of course both principles of “Be not brutal” and “Don’t be naïve” can be found within our hearts. However, when we speak, we will usually emphasize one message over the other. When we offer our first arguments or our one liners on social media, we will focus on one principle and give short shrift to the legitimacy of the other. When we speak in this way, do we really represent our full perspective? When we listen, we sometimes jump after the first thing stated to counter with our point and don’t wait to hear to the fullness of the other person’s heart.

If we waited and listened, would we not realize that the other person might actually appreciate and even agree with our points and we with hers or his?

When we hold everyone to the first thing they say or any quote attributed to them, we deny that people can hold views that are nuanced and complex. When we hold everyone to the first thing they say or any quote attributed to them, we forgo the opportunity to help them articulate better what they really believe.

Judaism is about both/and not either/or. *Don’t be naïve* and *be not brutal* are both principles found in the Torah. The very center of Torah contains the Golden Rule, the one Hillel used in its inverse to summarize the Torah. From Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself, *V’ahavta l’reiecha kamocho.*” Halevi taught that the first two words represent “Be not brutal”, but the last stands for “Don’t be naïve.” *Love your neighbor* is about thinking about the other. *As yourself* is about self-preservation. Both parts of the Golden Rule are ethical positions, caring for the other and preserving one’s self. Progressives may need to reflect more on *kamocho*, self-preservation, not being naïve. Right wingers may need to reflect more on *v’ahavta l’reiecha*, loving your neighbor, not being brutal. All of us, wherever we place ourselves on the spectrum, can affirm both ethics.

Hillel later summed up this both/and view with his aphorism: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?” (*Pirke Avot* Ethics of the Fathers, 1:14).

If you apply this to how Jews relate the state of Israel, a situation that gets complex and sometimes polarized very quickly, an insight emerges. As the two largest groups of Jews in the world, American and Israeli Jews face different realities. We American Jews are figuring out how to survive in the most hospitable environment the Jews have ever known. Israeli Jews are trying to survive in the least hospitable. Our responses are naturally different. Americans tend

to be more flexible; Israelis a bit harder. We thus need each other to represent Judaism most authentically. We need to be *chavruta*, study partners, on the excesses on brutality and naivety.

This summer, American Jews had a moment of confronting the intersection of *v'ahavta l'recha* and *kamocho*, of the ethic of loving your neighbor and the ethic of loving yourself. When the Movement for Black Lives, an umbrella of over 60 groups, published its Platform of over 40 policy demands, one section dealt with Israel and characterized the entire country as genocidal against the Palestinians. After a few days, it was discovered that this section was written primarily by two people. For most of the signatories to the Platform, it was not their focus but in a world-view that all suffering is connected, it was natural to include Palestinian suffering even if they cared mostly about what was happening in the streets of St. Paul and Baltimore and Chicago. Nevertheless, it was not clear how Jews could respond. Some Jewish groups reacted quickly from a position of “don't be naïve”, calling out the lies of labeling Israel genocidal.

Others who are motivated more by “be not brutal” and who feel that the work for racial justice is at the core of Jewish values and, for Jews of color, even more so existentially, these Jews felt that Israel is not the central issue here and thus the false language could be overlooked. For some Jews in the progressive community, distancing themselves from Israel's government and even Zionism feels liberating and is welcomed and rewarded in the progressive camp.

Unfortunately, this comes at a cost of not being able to fully talk about Jewish identity, not being able to talk about our own narratives and empathy for Jewish survival in challenging times. Another cost is that every other minority group is given the freedom to express their own narrative; only with Jews is the narrative assumed. Either you are a “Passover” Jew and are there to support others or you are a Purim Jew supporting the Israeli government. Like all dichotomies of course this is a false division.

The real challenge is that conversations take time. Listening with a full heart does not happen in a news cycle. I believe that the way to not be naïve is by staying at the table, not turning one's back. Not being naïve is about deeper dialogue so that people in the fight for racial justice understand why the language about Israel is wrong and how Jews can be against occupation and for a Jewish state. To stay at the table to explain why boycotts and divestments hurt more Palestinians than Israelis and is not bringing us closer to peace nor justice.

The way to not be brutal is to be creative in finding ways to continue the fight for racial justice knowing most of us still have more to learn about race and what it is like to live as a person of color. Mostly, it is to avoid the pitfall that Ellie Wiesel of blessed memory taught again and again, “The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.” The most important thing is to stay part of the conversation, indifferent not to Israel nor to the plight of Blacks in America but sophisticated in our both/and world view.

Before God opens Hagar's eyes and reveals the well in Genesis 21, God says to her: “What troubles you Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is, *ba'asher hu sham*.” It is a curious phrase: *where he is*. As it turns out, it is Hagar who cries out not Ishmael.

11th c commentator Rashi takes this to mean that God responded even in Ishmael's silence and judged him at that moment, not for past deeds or future deeds. This is the model for true listening. Getting close enough to people with different views to truly hear their perspective, with empathetic listening and imaginative love. Listening with the *middah*, the attribute of humility, knowing that we may not have figured it all out yet.

If religion, even organized religion, can do anything for us, it is this: to curtail our excesses, to offer us this sense of humility as we listen to other people. To listen though with self-awareness, that we honor our self as well. It is, in a phrase, to love our neighbor as our self, *v'ahavta l'reicha kamocho*.

If you walk through our building to our stairwell and walk up to the second floor, you will see our mosaic crafted under the direction of our congregant Sue Koch and a great group of volunteers. It has been seven years in the making because it represents our four *kivvunim*, our four directions of focus in Judaism: Israel, Tzedek (Justice), Torah, and now this year Shabbat. If you will look at how Torah is represented, it is intimately connected to Israel, leads into the wellsprings of justice and on its scroll are the words that are its essence, *v'ahavta l'reicha kamocho*. Looking at this gorgeous mosaic connects me to a memory: On a quiet, windswept hill in the Galilee, in the town of Safed, is a cemetery of some of Jewish mysticism's luminaries including the Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria. He lived only 38 years but transformed Judaism forever from that hilltop some five hundred years ago. On his grave--and I can remember it as clearly as standing here with you today--are written the words he repeated each morning to himself. It was his *kavanah*, his daily intention: *v'ahavta l'reicha kamocho*.

May we remain strong against indifference. May we stay in conversation, keeping our hearts humble and at times hard, loving our neighbor and also ourselves, and not holding people to the first thing they say, so that we can approach the challenges of today *with* our values and *without* naivety.

Ken yihi ratzon, may this be God's will, our will, and the will of all our neighbors. Amen.