

Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt

The Tyranny of Normal

Yom Kippur 5780

About 2 months ago I received a request to meet with one of our members who is now in college. She said that for the longest time she had felt like an outcast. Her clothes were never just right, her sense of humor was always just a bit off from what others seemed to think was funny and she had hoped college would be different. She loved the learning but finding her fit with friends was proving to be just as difficult as home. To add to all of this- she was not sure she still identified as a “she” and would it be ok to explore this part of her identity?

Of course, I said. Ultimately the most important guiding principle was that he/she find a place inside of herself that felt right, safe, the place from which she or he could emerge as the authentic self he/she was meant to be in this world. Worried about her parents reactions, worried about her friends reactions, worried that there would not be a place in the Jewish community for her. What might people say? She was worried she would

be seen as abnormal if she explored her identity. I reminded her that no one is normal and we are not the community we hope to be if we do not make space for exploration. She gave me permission to share this story with you.

This year our community lost 3 beloved members to suicide. Their pain so devastating that living was just too hard. Though each of these beloved souls suffered from something unique, I want to dedicate this sermon to them.

The philosopher Michel Foucault wrote: “The judges of normalcy are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements.” Though “Normal” is a social construct, we have let its standards rule our lives for too long.

I am not suggesting that we allow an abnormality that leads to cruelty --the kind of abnormality that we have seen from the highest office of this land,

or the creation of a society that does not have a set of laws, a system of ethics and morality by which we hold each other accountable-- but I am saying that we have reached a moment in time where we have lived under the tyranny of normalcy for too long. There is not one day that goes by in my job here as rabbi that I do not meet with a congregant who is walking around with shame for thinking differently- for living outside of the normative box- or kids who are struggling with the accepted norms of schools, how they are supposed to learn, or act with their groups of friends. Many just do not fit in- and it's not just kids- adults walk around with this too. If I am not observant enough I can't be here- if I don't believe in God I can't be here, if I don't read enough Hebrew, if I have married someone who is not Jewish, if I am single or don't have kids I don't belong here, if I am a Jew of color I will never fit in....the list goes on and on for ways the religious community and the community of the "normal" have become communities of exclusion. Tonight I would like to free us all and say enough with the normative culture that seeks to exclude, to harm, to shun, to leave no room for difference.

Inclusion and exclusion have been around as concepts probably for as long as humans have existed. But the idea of a standard of “normal” is relatively new. In his book “Normal Sucks”, Jonathan Mooney shares its history:

“The idea of the average as normal goes back to 1713 to the Swiss mathematician name Jakob Bernoulli, who many consider to be the founder of modern calculus and statistics. He created the equation known as the calculus of probabilities, which became the foundation of all statistics. Fast forward 100 years and the calculus of probabilities gets taken up by Adolphe Quetelet and applied to human beings. In 1835, he put forth the concept of the “average man.” His plan was to gather massive amounts of statistical data about any given population and calculate the mean, or most commonly occurring, of various sets of traits—height, weight, eye color—and later, qualities such as intelligence and morality, and use this “average man” as a model for society.” By the early 20th century the concept of the normal man took hold.” Did this research help create standards for education, for societal norms, averages, standards, and assist with production? Undoubtedly. Has it hurt generations of children and adults who do not fit into the norm of these standards? Absolutely.

I was one of those kids. I never fit into any boxes. My brain did not work like others in my school. I had tutors, therapists, testing--all of it. What got me through it all knowing what a gift I had deep inside even if the traditional places I inhabited couldn't see it? My mom. And what do you know--30 years later I am being that same mom to my kids, rabbi to my congregants and fighter of the construct of "the norm" that cannot possibly work for all of God's creations.

The rabbis of the Talmud railed against the standard, pristine "normal" human being. Every intricacy was a gift. Difference was to be blessed as a sign of God's magnificent creation.

In the Bavli there is a story told of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, was traveling one day from Migdal Gedor, from his rabbi's house, and he was riding on a donkey, swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah. He happened upon an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi. Elazar turned to him and said "reika" Worth- less person,

how ugly is that man. Are all of the people of your city as ugly as you?

The man said to him: I do not know, but you should **go and say to the**

Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made. When

Rabbi Elazar **realized that he** had sinned and insulted this man merely on

account of his appearance, he descended from his donkey and prostrated

himself before him, and he said to the man: I have sinned against you;

forgive me. The man said to him: No. I will not forgive you until you go

to the Craftsman Who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel you made.

The man finally forgives Elazar saying, "I will forgive this man provided that

he accepts upon himself not to become accustomed to behave like this."

The reika- the "worthless man" the "ugly man" in this story is the stand in

for anyone who is different. The greatest sin of Rabbi Elazar is that he can

study so much Torah and be so unable to see the beauty in all of God's

creatures. That vessel cannot teach Torah. Human decency, kindness

towards the other is actually what piety looks like in this world.

In his legendary book "Far From the Tree" professor Andrew Solomon

teaches that being exceptional, being other, is at the core of the human

condition. Solomon documents love over prejudice and what happens when difference becomes a uniting factor rather than a tool for exclusion. He tells the story of Clinton Brown who was born with diastrophic dwarfism, a severely disabling condition. The doctors at the hospital told his parents he wouldn't live for any length of time, and that they should probably just leave him at the hospital so that he could die there quietly, and that it might be easiest if they didn't see him. They didn't see him for three days while they thought about it, and then his mother said, "Well, that's my baby and I want to take my baby home, and if he dies very soon, at least I'll know I did my best." She took him home and for a year she took him to see various doctors who said, "Diastrophic dwarfism, are you prepared for this? Do you know about that? You understand he's never going to walk? You understand he's never going to talk?"

And then finally she found her way, despite not having vast resources, to the best doctor for the treatment of skeletal dysplasias in the United States with someone named Steven Kopits of Johns Hopkins. She described taking him into Dr. Kopits, and Dr. Kopits lifted him up in the air and said, "Let me tell you, that's going to be a handsome young man one day." She

described how her whole life was turned around in that moment. Clint, then, under the aegis of Dr. Kopits, had 30 major surgical procedures in the course of his childhood, as a result of which he actually can walk and has mobility. But some of them were spinal surgeries and he was often immobilized for up to three months at a time. While he was stuck in a variety of hospitals, he decided there was nothing else much to do and so he focused on his schoolwork, and he did really well at it. Better than anyone in his family had ever done. He became the first person in his family ever to go to college.

He went to college, and he joined a fraternity, and he had a specially-fitted car that was adjusted for his extraordinary frame. He's less than three feet tall. The college wasn't very far away from where his parents lived, the one that he went to, and his mother called Andrew Solomon one day and said, "I was driving home from shopping and I went past a bar, and there was Clinton's car parked outside a bar, and I thought to myself, 'He's three feet tall, they're six feet tall. Two beers for them is four beers for him.'" She said, "And I wanted to go in there and interrupt, but I knew I couldn't do that, so I just drove home and left him 11 messages on his voicemail." She said,

“And then I thought, if someone had said to me when he was born that my future worry would be that he would go drinking and driving with his college buddies, I’d have been so thrilled to have that problem.”

Andrew Solomon said to his mom, “What did you do that allowed someone for whom there was such a dire prognosis to emerge as someone who’s happy and popular and funny and surrounded by friends, and who’s succeeded in almost every possible way?” And she said, “What did we do? We loved him, that’s all. Clinton just always had that light in him, and we were fortunate enough to be the first to see it there.”

The great 13th century Kabbalist Shimon Lavi wrote about God’s hidden light in his book *Ketem Paz*. He said that in the midst of creation when human beings were created, God hid some of God’s light into the soul of each person. He says, “My teacher taught me that Adam (the original human) resembled the primordial light that was hidden away. Afterward a thread-thin ray appeared, giving soul to the people on [earth] and spirit to those who walk on it (Isaiah 42:5).

We can find this primordial light if we cherish difference and make room for it in our communities. To see difference as an emanation of the Divine, we have to become curious about it rather than frightened by it. When we do this, we will also benefit from the multiplicity of mental, physical and spiritual gifts that are already amongst us- but have not been given the space to thrive.

In a recent interview, famed climate activist Greta Thunberg spoke of her strength to speak to world leaders with passion and clarity. She said it was her neurological diagnosis of Asperger's that has made her less focused on social norms. She said that her neurodiversity actually helped her think differently than most people who approach the climate crisis. Thunberg said, "Especially in such a big crisis like this one, we need to think outside the box, we need to think outside our current system, we need people who aren't like everyone else." she added. "And — given the right circumstances — being different is a superpower."

This need to make space for difference is not only a need when we talk about physical difference and neurodiversity but diversity within the space of the religious community as well.

Over the last several years Aaron and I have made it a practice at Adas to cultivate a religious environment where exploring theological differences and existential questions are part of our communal learning. We have sought to create an institution where exploration is the foundation of what it means to base oneself in the Jewish tradition. All questions permitted. All searching permitted. We have sought to do away with traditional synagogue “norms” of who is allowed in davening spaces, (read kids permitted), how we talk about our own spiritual struggles and the stuff of life that we are all walking around with. We want each of you here- all of you--in your fullness. Whether you perceive yourself as “normative” or not. The ideal community treats difference as a precious commodity and sees its success in how cared for the most vulnerable feel.

There is a story told in the Bavli and the Yerushalmi of a rabbi named Elisha ben Abuyah. As a young child he studied Torah, he was the son of a learned rabbi and he grew up to be known as a formidable teacher. One day something went wrong. You see there is a concept within Torah כּל

העושה מצוה אחת מטיבין לו that anyone who performs a mitzvah, has goodness bestowed upon him.

One day Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya was walking on his way when he saw a father ask his son to climb a ladder and retrieve baby birds from a nest for food. The boy went ahead and climbed the ladder, shooing away the mother bird- if you know your mitzvot, then you know that the son was performing 2 separate mitzvot here. 1) honoring his father by responding to his request 2) shooing away the mother bird before taking the babies which the Torah says will lead to long life. At the exact moment when the boy began to shoo away the mother bird, the ladder fell and the boy died. After seeing this incident with the religious framework he had been trained to believe- that someone performing a mitzvah would be protected!, Elisha ben Abuya had an existential crisis and fell of the religious path. He could not make sense out of what he saw and no one was there to process the inner conflict that had arisen. After this incident he was often seen riding his horse on Shabbat- unimaginable in the Jewish community of his time. The rabbis began to refer to him not as Elisha or as Rabbi- but with the name Aher- meaning Other.

He was Other to the entire community except his student, Rabbi Meir.

Rabbi Meir would leave the Beit Midrash to walk with Elisha on Shabbat and talk Torah.

At the end of the story Elisha dies and after he is buried, fire comes forth from heaven to burn his grave. The sages went and told Rabbi Meir: The grave of your master is on fire! Rabbi Meir went out, spread his cloak over the grave... and said, "if God is not willing to redeem you, then I, Meir, will redeem you." Immediately the fire was extinguished.

Rabbi Meir is the hero in this story who is able to see beyond the boundaries that the rabbis established for maintaining community. He sees into the soul of Elisha and he connects to the light of his soul, making space for him in life and in death. He is the one that keeps Elisha ben Abuya alive and it is because of him that Elisha rests in peace.

If you identify as Rabbi Meir in this story and fit nicely into societal norms- arbitrary as they are- it is on you and all of the Rabbi Meir's out there to

break down arbitrary boundaries, to obliterate them. To see the Aher- to rise and meet her wherever she is and though she may look differently, learn differently, speak differently, think differently- she needs companionship, she needs to be seen like the rest of us.

The God we pray to is one of Infinite diversity who see our infinite diversity and embraces it. Remember the story all the way back in the beginning of the Torah, Genesis Chapter 11, the Tower of Babel? The people gathering together with a uniform language, all together one team trying to build a tower as high as the heavens. There is much ink spilled about why this was seen as problematic. Isn't uniformity good, isn't coming together even a *mitzvah*? A shared language a positive thing in the eyes of God? About what were they are considered sinners?

The Torah says there: וְיְהִי כָל-הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים:

Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words.

וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים - Most commentators teach that this added phrase means something more than “only of one tongue”; they were also of *devarim*

achadim, which may best be translated as “of one discourse,” or as Radak puts it, “of one consensus.” To only have one language or one ideology, one project or one way of being in the world, or in a community, might create a strong, group, a uniform set of principles and ideas, but it does so at a price. One that we should note, has the potential to crush the individual, to silence disagreement, and diminish the Divine emanations. The Zohar says it the best: Shekhinah is the Sod haEfshar, Secret of the Possible, giving birth to endless unique creations.

From the beginning of time we have a desire to create a singular category called normal we think it will help us reach toward heaven but in fact it is doing just the opposite.

Yom Kippur is the day of the vulnerable. It is the day where we come before God and we say please see me. See all of what I reveal and all of what I am hiding. We do this in community so that none of us are alone in this project. We need each other like Elisha needed Rabbi Meir, and when

we come together- instead of being one unified voice we need to make space for each of us- our infinite, unique, holy light. Amen.