

Sermon: Shemot: “Holy Diversity”

For the first few years of rabbinical school in Los Angeles, I sang on the davening team, I was one of the song leaders, at Ikar, a spiritual community in LA that has a bit of a celebrity status. At the time I was attending Ikar, the two main spiritual leaders were Rabbi Sharon Brous, who brought her passionate fight for justice to podcasts and TV networks and the national stage, and Rabbi Ronit Tsadok, whose love of halacha and deep spirituality were contagious. These two women led us, and we gladly followed.

One of my favorite anecdotes from that chapter of life came one weekend when a parent from a young Ikar family recounted to me that their preschool-aged son, who absolutely loved coming to Ikar, had asked them, very earnestly: “Mama, can boys be rabbis, too?”

Think about that. It makes me giggle, yes, but think about the purity of that question and what inspired it-- this young boy had spent his short life surrounded by spiritual leaders who happened to be women, not men. When he thought “rabbi”,

he didn't think about an old man with a beard and peyas wearing all black (though to be fair, I don't think that's quite the look Rabbi Raskin is going for, either!) He genuinely wondered if boys could be rabbis, too, because he had only ever seen women being rabbis. He did not know, in his heart of hearts, that someone like him could grow up to be a rabbi.

That's because if we only see one demographic of people fulfilling a certain role, especially when we are kids, we might assume that that one demographic is the only type of person who can fulfill the role.

We might assume that certain jobs can only be done by certain types of people.

Here in the Sherman ECC, we are cognizant of reading a wide variety of stories to the children, so that they will know that families come in all shapes and sizes, that people of all backgrounds and religions and skin colors can be teachers and doctors and parents, and that everyone has a valued role to play in a healthy society.

It can be harder to be this intentionally inclusive, though, when we are reading our most ancient texts. The stories in the Torah are powerful because we have read them for generations and they contain ancient wisdom. On the other hand, though, this wisdom is told through the lens of cultural norms that existed thousands of years ago: the norms of a society that was often patriarchal, where different genders were not afforded the same opportunities and rights.

Consequently, so many of the characters and heroes of our Torah are memorable males: Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Noah, Joshua, Jonah, Samuel, David, Saul, etc. Even God is conjugated in the masculine. Our texts like the Mishna and the Talmud are filled with male rabbis whose wisdom has stood the test of time. I read them, I study them with joy, and I love to be in their conversations-- and yet, only occasionally is there a named female.

And this is one of the reasons why, as a woman, I love this week's parashah, Shemot. Parashat Shemot is quite possibly the Torah portion where we see the greatest level of female representation and heroism in the whole Torah, maybe even across our sacred texts. In Shemot, we see the midwives

Shifra and Puah, who bravely stand up to a tyrant and defy his murderous orders; we see Moses' mother Yocheved and sister Miriam, who keep Moses alive despite Pharaoh's decree and who trust in God to protect him in his basket; we meet Batya, the daughter of Pharaoh, who raises an Israelite child as her own despite her father's bigotry, and we meet Moses' wife Zipporah, who honors Moses' faith and circumcises her son when Moses' life is in danger-- all of these women work together to help birth the Jewish nation, to bring the Israelites out of slavery, to nurture our leaders, to stand up to tyranny, to inspire and lead our people in song and dance, to make us who we are today. The sheer number of women taking an active role in this week's parashah is unrivaled.

And it is impossible to read parashat Shemot and not come away knowing, for sure, that all kinds of people were needed to make our people's story a reality. When I read parashat Shemot, I feel seen, as a woman. I feel valued. I feel known. I feel represented.

Nowadays I also feel more represented in secular society than ever before. This is kind of like the fact that there are currently more women, more people of color, and more openly LGBTQ individuals in the United States Congress than ever before, not to mention on the president's Cabinet. There is a woman-- a Black woman-- one heartbeat away from the presidency for the first time.

I mean, the world is still a bit of a mess, and sometimes it's hard to stay optimistic -- but regardless of political affiliation, regardless of religious affiliation, it is heartening to see that across the board, little kids all over our nation can look at their elected representatives and say "that person looks like me. I could do that job one day, too." And then they can look at their friends, of all shapes and sizes, and see that all of those friends are represented, too. That those friends have the same human value that they do.

It's vitally important that not only in secular spaces, but also especially in religious spaces, which should feel like home to our hearts and minds, that kids feel this same sense of welcome and belonging.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, who we celebrate this weekend, famously said: “Science gives us knowledge, which is power; religion gives us wisdom, which is control. Science deals mainly with facts, religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals.” And while I agree that the two are not rivals, I think that this is a bit of a false dichotomy, and that our Jewish tradition gives us a way to unite these two ideas in one word: that word is “to know”.

In the Torah, the word “know” is famously a euphemism for sexual activity. “And Adam knew Eve”, etc etc. But this euphemistic usage doesn’t negate the word’s basic, core meaning: that to know something, or someone, to truly know them, is to understand them and to value them, to see their worth, to understand their story, and to respect them.

In this week’s Torah Portion, we see this core usage of the word “to know”. **וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדָע** **וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדָע** and a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.

This use of the word “know” is, of course, not a euphemism. This verse is saying “a new king arose over Egypt, who did not value Joseph and his experience and wisdom and who did not see the worth of Joseph and Joseph’s people.” And this lack of knowledge caused our people AND the Egyptian people a whole lot of suffering. Joseph simply wasn’t part of this new Pharaoh’s worldview. Joseph wasn’t valued in the new Pharaoh’s eyes. Joseph wasn’t a normal, everyday, essential part of the new Pharaoh’s life or government.

And This. Is. Why. Representation. Matters. Just like how it matters, deeply, who is named and not named in a Torah portion, and who we see on TV, and who is in Congress. How in the world are we supposed to know each other, and value each other, without seeing each other celebrated and elevated across the board? When our kids see people of all types represented throughout life, they know, deeply, that everyone deserves that same respect. These little kids nowadays know that they can be whatever they want to be. They know that each and every one of their peers has value and potential. They know that deferring to one type of person all the time is not fair, and not healthy.

Midrash Tanchuma, when discussing this new Pharaoh, warns us of the longer-term consequences of not seeing the value in people who are different from us. Midrash Tanchuma describes the slippery slope that Pharaoh is on now that he does not know Joseph, pointing out that in Chapter 1 of Shemot, Pharaoh only claims not to know Joseph: but by Chapter 5, Pharaoh is saying that he does not know the Lord: “לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־יְהוָה וְגַם אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אָשִׁיחַ” “I don’t know God, and I will not send the Israelites away to worship God.” The first step is not knowing and valuing another person; but this leads to not knowing and not valuing God.

If we believe that we are all made in God’s image, then if we fail to value and honor our human diversity, we are failing to value and honor God’s diversity, too.

To truly know each other, to truly value each other, is a sacred thing.

And it is OUR job, in the spirit of Joseph and the heroines of this week's Torah portion, to re-commit ourselves to nurturing a world where inclusion and representation are so everyday that nobody has to ask "Are boys allowed to...." or "can girls do...." or "can Jews do...." because the answer will be obvious.

Yes, we can.

We all can.

Shabbat Shalom.