

Sermon | Parshat Ki Tetzei
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Curiosity and Compassion

"We have all learnt with deep sorrow of the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Across the nation and throughout the world people of all faiths and none are contemplating her life and achievements with profound respect. Her long reign and unwavering dedication represented stability, service, humanity and dignity in a rapidly changing and often dangerous world. With her death we have lost a figurehead at once regal and deeply human, and her passing will touch us all in ways we are only just beginning to feel. We wish King Charles III and all the royal family comfort and strength at this sad and humbling time." These are the words of my colleague, Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, Rabbi of New North London Synagogue and Senior Rabbi of Masorti Judaism in the United Kingdom. Similar sentiments were shared by Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, the established Orthodox institution of the United Kingdom. He referred to Her Majesty as "a rock of stability and a champion of timeless values."

And here, on the other side of the pond, we find ourselves paying respect to her well-lived life. The *Washington Post* reported what sounds like an astonishing fact: 9 out of 10 people alive on this planet today were born *after* Queen Elizabeth II ascended the throne. She is the only British monarch that most have ever known. There is a palpable curiosity in America for the British royal family. Movies, television series (including *The Crown*, a Netflix series which announced yesterday that it will momentarily pause filming of the sixth season), and documentaries reveal a deep sense of curiosity and interest on the part of us Americans for the

British monarchy. Perhaps it is the pageantry, perhaps it is the age-old traditions of monarchies now stripped of the absolute authority they once held. Regardless, there is a real sense of affection and curiosity for these royals. When they mourn, we mourn with them.

And there is also an inescapable tension when we consider the arc of history and the relationship between our nation and theirs. Our neighbors in the United Kingdom, including the royal family, are not the enemies against whom we waged war for our freedoms. In fact, they are now one of our nation's closest allies and friends. The passing of time, the events of history, and the development of a shared ethos in the international arena account for this significant shift in the relationship between our two countries. Enemies became friends. Neighbors became interested in one another with a sense of compassionate curiosity.

Turning to our *parsha*, Ki Tetzei, we learn about the neighbors of the ancient Israelites, and the Torah's instructions for how to treat those neighbors. לֹא-יָבֹא עַמּוֹנִי וּמוֹאָבִי בְּקֶהֱל יְהוָה. "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of Adonai; no descendants of such, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of Adonai, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you."¹ The Torah depicts the Moabites as our ultimate enemy because of how they treated our ancestors. As a result, they are to be excluded from our community for all time. But we all know that this does not last. Time passes. Historical events transpire. Neighbors transform from enemies to friends. After all, Ruth, the paradigmatic convert of the Hebrew Bible and great-grandmother of our own esteemed monarch, King David, was herself a Moabite!

¹ Deuteronomy 23:4-5.

Our tradition wrestles with this tension between the ruling of the Torah and the reality of later Jewish history in two different ways. The Talmud Yerushalmi offers a very narrow interpretation of the Torah's words by suggesting the prohibition on marrying a Moabite is only about marrying Moabite men, not Moabite women, because the text says מואבי, not מואבית. That is, of course, an easy way to get around the apparent tension. But it isn't terribly convincing because Numbers 25, which describes the narrative of Pinchas, clearly shows that Moabite women were not permitted to marry Israelite men. (If you do not remember what happened there, let us just say that Pinchas used a spear to impale an Israelite male and a Moabite female.)

The Talmud Bavli offers a much more compelling explanation for this apparent tension, and one that I believe also animates the relationship between America and the United Kingdom. There, it tells the story of Yehuda, an Ammonite convert, who is granted permission to enter into the Israelite community by Rabbi Yehoshua, against the opinion of Rabban Gamliel. What is the nature of their disagreement? Rabban Gamliel points to our verse from the *parsha* prohibiting the Ammonite and Moabite from becoming part of our community, and Rabbi Yehoshua cites a historical fact: כבר בא סנחריב ובלבל את כל האומות, "Sennacherib already came and scrambled all the nations."² In other words, the historical reality was that those who lived in Moab at the time of Rabbi Yehoshua were not the Moabites of the Torah who ill-treated the Israelites and attempted to wage war against them. Time had passed and the historical circumstances had changed. The Torah's prohibition against the Moabites no longer held, and an individual from Ammon or Moab would be welcomed into the community.

² Talmud Bavli Berakhot 28.

With the passing of time and the inevitable changing of circumstances and realities, the Torah's depiction of a few nations as ultimate enemies of the Israelites was no longer an acceptable way of understanding the world. The British are no longer our enemies, but rather are our dear and cherished friends. Friends and neighbors are interested in each other's wellbeing, curious about one another, and compassionate towards each other. If we can demonstrate such curiosity to our neighbors across the pond, how much more so can we harness that curiosity, interest, and compassion towards our neighbors in our own backyard, peoples and communities who live right here in the DMV, but with whom we rarely interact.

Tomorrow is the Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington's annual Unity Walk, a public demonstration of love and support for all who live in our region. The Walk takes you to 11 houses of worship and spiritual centers in Northwest DC with opportunities to engage in conversation, to do hands-on activities, to hear music, and to share cultural treats. B'nai Israel, along with other synagogues and houses of worship, is a cosponsor of the Unity Walk. I also took the pledge to address the topic of unity on this Shabbat, which includes a pledge to get curious about my neighbors. In joining this walk and visiting others in the Washington faith community, I hope to fulfill that pledge to get curious, to learn about my neighbors. If I can be curious about those who live more than three-thousand miles away, I can be curious about those who live less than thirty miles away. I can work to get to know people outside of the Jewish community. I can learn to be proximate to them, hearing their stories and learning about both their struggles and their successes. I can recognize the importance of finding common ground and building a coalition based on shared values, rather than hiding behind ancient fences built into our psyche that tell us to keep others out and stick only with our own.

If we can learn to be curious about our real neighbors, then we can continue the process of building cooperative and supportive relationships, finding ways to work together on shared values. From this curiosity will hopefully emerge a sense of compassion, a real desire to work with and alongside our neighbors in other faith and cultural communities. We need not ignore our differences, neither the historical ones nor the modern ones. Being curious and compassionate means that I can see those differences and I can find commonalities. We can maintain who we are, be proud of our Jewish identity, while also honoring and respecting the identities of others. In so doing, we build unity, expand the metaphorical borders of our communities, and cultivate a sense of compassionate care for everyone in our midst. Shabbat shalom.