

“V’khol Ba-ei Olam, All the Inhabitants of the Earth” Are Welcome

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My mother still regrets that we didn’t speak more Hebrew at home. My parents sent me to Jewish school; I learned Hebrew; I understand it quite fluently; but I would have benefitted from more casual Hebrew speaking at home. Certainly, my word retrieval could have become more natural.

So why didn’t we do it? My mother says it is because she wanted to fit in in America; or she was made to feel that she *had* to fit in. My father’s family is wonderful. They embraced my mother, and she is forever grateful for how they helped her as a recent immigrant from Israel. But along with the much-needed support, there was a subtle disdain for the culture and place from which she came. “You’re in America now,” she was told. “And in America we speak English.” She watched the “Howdy Doody Show” and learned English *quite well*; but we would have benefitted from a little more Hebrew in the home.

It isn’t just the language. My mother’s family came to Eretz Israel from Iraq – my grandfather in 1936 and my grandmother a little later – and I know almost nothing about their story. The religious influence was entirely from my father’s side – Ashkenazic from Poland and Russia – partly because my great-grandfather (for whom I am named) had such a profound influence on my father, and partly because his Ashkenazic practices were considered normal, while the Mizrahi traditions of my mother’s family were considered strange.

And not just in my family. The American Jewish community is and was “Ashkenormative” in outlook. Descendants of German and Polish and Russian immigrants are the clear majority here. Even in Israel, where the Sephardi and Mizrahi ethnicities represent more than 60% of the population, the light-skinned Ashkenazis from Poland and Germany represented the Zionist elite, especially in the 1950s and 60s when my mother was growing up. There are still today leftover grievances from that period in Israel, but that’s not my focus this morning.

My point is that this rich, interesting part of my identity was downplayed when I was growing up and it is a shame because that is far from the only example. There are so many others who live in our community or want to be part of our community, and sometimes we just don’t see them. We don’t fully appreciate the contributions they might make if we could get them in.

In a little bit, the cantor is going to chant Unetaneh Tokef, perhaps the most recognizable liturgical piece of the day. Before we get to the part about “who will live and who will die,” the poet imagines God sitting on the divine throne. “*V’khol ba-ei olam ya-avrun lefanekha, All the inhabitants of the world pass before You.*” The line comes from the Talmud, which supports the notion with a verse from Psalms, which calls God “The One who fashions hearts and understands **all** of humanity’s deeds.”

What does it mean that all the world passes before God? It means that God does what most of us fail to do. God looks at a group and sees individuals; God discerns difference; God sees the folks on

the margins, whom society too often renders invisible. God values the contributions and potential contributions of all people, not just the ones in front.

You have probably heard some version of the story of a child from another community coming to B'nai Israel on a Shabbat morning pointing to the *bima* and asking her mother: "Who's that guy standing up there?" When the mother answers, "That's the rabbi," the child responds: "You mean *men* can be rabbis?!?"

Fifty years ago, it was *only* men. The transition towards including women on the pulpit meant more than just allowing *them* to join *our* rabbinate. Ordaining women meant inviting the female leadership voice into the conversation. It meant inviting women to render opinions on matters of Jewish law, and to respond to canonical passages where the female voice is clearly absent. For example, did you know that women's desire to marry is stronger than men's?!? I didn't either! But that's what the Talmud says "More than a man wants to marry, a woman wants to marry." I seriously doubt that statement would have made it into the Talmud if women had been invited to the editorial committee.

Once upon a time, it was enough for a feminist reading of the Bible to just point out the female characters and leaders, from Sarah to Deborah to Ruth. But that isn't enough today. A more proper feminist reading acknowledges the relative absence of the female voice – even when we see the character's name – and imagines how our sacred stories might have been told differently through a woman's perspective.

We see it in tomorrow's Torah reading, when Abraham gets up early in the morning to bring Isaac to Mount Moriah to be sacrificed. What would Sarah have said if she had been asked her opinion of God's command? (Or what *did* she say at a dinner conversation the night before that never made it into the text?) We'll never know, but we can imagine. ... No, we must imagine what those once-silenced voices would say.

It is notable that even as the human biblical characters discount the woman's voice, God does not. In today's reading, God says to Abraham, "Whatever Sarah tells you, *sh'ma b'kolah*, listen to her voice." It's complicated because Sarah is asking for something that seems so harsh, but we can't help but notice how God values Sarah's perspective.

After Hagar and Ishmael are cast away, and they are wandering in the desert without food or water, God sees them. God blesses them. God opens Hagar's eyes and she discovers a spring. A few chapters earlier, the first time Hagar was banished from Abraham's home, God also appeared to her. Hagar named that place "Be'er La-Hai Ro-i, A well to the Living God who Sees me." She named her son Ishmael, which means "God hears," to emphasize that God hears and sees and values all creatures, even the ones others cast aside and render invisible. God's example becomes our challenge.

For me, this is the reason we include the matriarchs in the Amidah. I never imagined I would get to the point where it sounds funny for me to hear the Amidah without Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. They were missing from my daily prayer for most of my life, and I didn't really notice. Who are the others we fail to notice?

In August, I attended a conference of the Multi Faith Neighbors Network. Our hosts explained that they use the term “multifaith” instead of “interfaith” because “interfaith” implies having to give something up in order to join the group. Multifaith means appreciating the blessings of connecting with people who are different without asking them (or them asking me) to change.

We were split into groups by religion and asked to write a sermon on peace. Our Jewish group began by looking at the word *shalom*, which shares a root with the word *shalem*, which means “complete.” We posited that peace means “inclusion.” Peace means “belonging.” Peace is achieved when diverse peoples learn to live together and appreciate their differences. Over time, our understanding of community has expanded to include women, LGBTQ+, immigrants ... and multifaith interactions. Peace will come when hatred ends. That’s why we must fight antisemitism.

Yasser Arafat, Jimmy Carter, and Menachem Begin were in an airplane, and it was about to crash. ... Yeah, you can’t tell that joke anymore. The punchline involves two parachutes and a *tallis* bag, but it isn’t appropriate for a sermon about belonging or peace.

It reminds me of the rabbi who was approached by the president of the synagogue on the morning after a board meeting, to be told that the board had determined they were not going to offer the rabbi a raise. The rabbi is of course disappointed, and he tells the president, “You know, I was counting on that raise. After all, I am just a poor preacher.”

To which the president responds, “That’s exactly what they said after your sermon last Shabbat!”

Twenty years ago, the discussion was about homosexuality. People expressed discomfort with a Torah verse that appears to prohibit homosexual activity, and we learned to interpret that verse in new ways. Some suggested homosexuality wasn’t an issue for suburban communities like ours because “they” didn’t live here; but that was a farce. Our understanding of who belongs in the community expanded.

It expanded to include transgender. And not just to include. We had to train ourselves to be more understanding, more welcoming ... to use people’s preferred pronouns even when it feels uncomfortable; to affirm people’s right to be themselves, express themselves, and feel safe and valued as children of God while doing so.

With leadership from Cantor Bolts, we are forming a Belonging Committee for our congregation. Expanding on the disability work of our inclusion committee, we have identified four areas on which to concentrate: Jews of color, sexuality and gender identity, the broad range of observance and education levels among our members, and including the non-Jewish members of our families in synagogue life. Belonging is not as simple as putting up a sign. I urge you to join the conversation.

This may be a challenging message in our polarized world, so I want to affirm the value of ideological diversity as well. We tend to be suspicious of those who present differently or espouse contrary views. But this may be an area where Conservative Judaism has something to contribute. Of all the Jewish movements, ours is the one most committed to the idea of pluralism. Our Committee on Jewish Law and Standards is comprised of 25 voting members, but an opinion only requires 6 affirmative votes to be considered authoritative.

So, do the math. On any issue, there can be 4 legitimately approved opinions, sometimes in opposition to one another. Some Conservative congregations use musical instruments on Shabbat, while others say the practice is prohibited. That is pluralism. We value the Big Tent and expect that members of our community will have different views about politics, tradition, and law. And we must welcome them all.

The Talmud says this is how it's supposed to be. No singular authority can definitively tell us what is right or wrong or *kosher* or *treif*. It is up to us as individuals to consider all the opinions. In the Talmud's words, "*aseh oznekha k'afarkeset*, Make your ears a hopper," able to take in all the different opinions and filter them down to your own measured view.

Those who disagree are not necessarily wrong; they simply draw different conclusions. Need a proof-text? When God gives the Ten Commandments, we read: "*Vayedaber Elohim et kol hadevarim ha-eleh*, God spoke **all** these words." Says the Talmud: All the interpretations, all the rulings, all the opinions are rooted in the same Torah and given by the same God. We have to make room for opposing viewpoints.

Sometimes that means learning to love the "in your face" contrarian, and at other times it means training our eyes to see people who might otherwise be invisible. My friend, the late Esther Kravitz, spoke this way about mental illness. She called it a "no kugel disease." It isn't like the other illnesses, where people line up to bring meals and offer support. Too often, individuals suffer from mental illness or addiction in the shadows.

The numbers are staggering. Statistics shared with me by JSSA suggest that one out of seven 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder. Suicide is the **4th leading cause** of death in 15-29-year-olds. Too often, their suffering goes unnoticed. And it's a problem because feeling invisible is literally bad for a person's health.

And that's why it is so important that we learn to emulate God, who on Rosh Hashanah sees and honors all beings. JSSA offers its J-Caring hotline, and the B'nai Israel clergy want to help as well. Here is our simple message: *If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. But if you feel like nobody notices or nobody cares ... that's where you are wrong. We love you. We want to see you. And if you come to us, we will listen ... before we start rattling off advice.*

There is this scene in Exodus when Pharaoh is ready to send away the Israelites, and he challenges Moses with one final question: "*Mi vami ha-holkhim?*" he asks. "Who exactly is going to go with you?" When Moses says it will be everyone, "men, women, children, old, young, animals,

everyone,” Pharaoh says, “No! The men can go with you, but that is it.” A commentary imagines Pharaoh trying to reason with Moses: “You don’t want to take the children,” he says. “They make too much noise; they get in the way; just leave them at home. Your community is big enough; you have enough to worry about.” But Moses is adamant. *Everyone* means *all of them*. The plagues continue until Pharaoh relents.

The challenge is that evil Pharaoh is not the only person in history to leave folks out. Think of America’s founding: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. ...” Who was included, and who was left out?

Look around you. Who are the folks we want to get to know better this year? Who might need our support if they are to express their full selves? Who isn’t here at all because they fear ours is not the community for them? How can we expand to include more diversity within our sacred home?

V’khol ba-ei olam ya-avrun lefanekha. On this sacred day, all the inhabitants of the earth pass before a loving God who sees and discerns and appreciates and judges and blesses. Black Jews. White Jews. Brown Jews. Ashkenazi and Sefardi Jews. Non-Jews. He. She. They. Gay and straight. Cis and trans. Conservative, liberal, and progressive. Individuals with remarkable abilities and those with disabilities. All are created in the image of God. All belong in God’s sanctuary.

And so, it is up to us – to hear the message and act upon it so we may all be blessed. May this be a year of health, joy, and growth **for us all**. Shanah Tovah.