

## South of the Haimish Line



Whoever would think of Kenya or Tanzania as “haimish?”

In a recent column in *The New York Times*, David Brooks spoke about his family’s experience on safari in Africa. The family stayed in seven “camps” on this thrilling experience. Some of the camps were simple; others, elegant and luxurious. At some point he realized that the simple camps were “friendly, warm and familial.”

They got to know other guests and the staff. The kids played easily and noisily together.

The luxurious camps, on the other hand, were cold by comparison. There was not as much interaction among the guests, and none with the staff except as servants. The tents were farther apart, and people did not venture out from their own family grouping.

It occurred to him that the only way to really describe the quality that divided the simple camps from the luxury ones was the Yiddish word, *haimish*. *Haimish* “suggests warmth, domesticity and unpretentious conviviality.” When he moved from one type of encampment to the other, he concluded, “We crossed an invisible *Haimish* Line.”

I thought about that *Haimish* Line for a long time. In the 50’s and 60’s, synagogues wanted to be on one side of the *Haimish* Line. They wanted to be formal and awe-inspiring. The key value in those days was “decorum.” Congregants were expected to be quiet or hushed, children were to be seen and not heard, and often both not seen and not heard. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his book *Man’s Quest for God*, that “The modern temple suffers from a severe cold.”

But with the 70’s and 80’s the tide turned. As people were becoming more alienated and isolated in their lives in society, they wanted their synagogue to be a place of warmth and spontaneity, not stone-cold decorum. Nothing symbolizes that trend more than the way we welcome children and their youthful sounds to our services.

Clearly, the American synagogue is struggling to cross back to the *haimish* side of our culture.

But *haimish* is not only, or even primarily, a quality of our religious services. It is a quality that defines how we interact with one another. It encompasses the virtues of welcoming and friendship. It means not sticking to the people you know, but greeting the people you have not met yet. It means caring about the other person enough to want to know who he or she is.

There is a story about the Hasidic Rebbe Moshe Leib of Sassov. One day he was watching two friends deeply engaged in conversation. The first asked, “Do you love me?” Said the other, “Of course I love you. You are my best friend.” After a few moments, the first asked a follow-up question. “Do you know what causes me pain?” Said the second, “How would I possibly know that?”

“Then,” replied the first person, “If you don’t know what causes me pain, how can you say you love me?”

We may not always know what causes someone pain, but we can often sense pain if we take the time to look. Cindy told me of an experience that she had recently in the hospital where she works. She saw another nurse who looked sad to her. She went up to her and said, “You look like you need a hug.” The other nurse replied, “Haven’t you heard? I was just diagnosed with breast cancer.”

We live in such an anonymous world. We often suffer in silence. That’s the way of decorum. The way of the luxurious encampment.

We need to strive to bring down the decorum barrier, cross the *Haimish* Line, and make our synagogue one of love and caring, where we are open to each other, and give each other a break. Where we look into our neighbors’ eyes, and know that they are in pain. And need a hug. And a kind word. And some encouragement. And a shoulder to lean on.

As we begin a new year, let us strive to be a more *haimish* congregation, one in which we care about each other, rejoice in our happy triumphs, and support each other in times of distress and challenge.

As David Brooks concludes, “Sometimes it’s best to . . . stay south of the *Haimish* Line.” Amen!

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