

*Kevod Ha-Beriyot and Meshaneh Ha-Beriyot:*  
Human Dignity and the Beautiful Mystery of Human Diversity

Rabbi Louis Polisson  
Congregation Or Atid of Wayland, MA  
*Erev Yom Kippur*  
10th of *Tishrei*, 5782 - Wednesday, September 15, 2021

Tonight, I'd like us to think about diversity and human dignity, beginning with the false binary of ability and disability. My hope is that together, we can engage in the challenging inner work of liberating our hearts and minds from arbitrary assumptions and biases, as we seek to embrace and embody the Jewish value of *Kevod Ha-Beriyot* - human dignity and diversity.

Let's begin with a thought exercise. Think of someone you know personally who has a disability, physical or mental. Think of how multidimensional their personality is, how full their life is. Now think of someone you don't know well with a disability, perhaps someone you see on occasion or someone you once passed by randomly, and apply your awareness of the complexity of each human being to that random person. That's what it means to overcome bias - to operate out of respect, understanding, and compassion. It means narrowing the distance between us and those we perceive as different by dismantling our assumptions.

I only truly started thinking deeply about disability and diversity in rabbinical school, thanks to a few classmates who are disability rights activists and

educators, and have disabilities themselves. I witnessed firsthand how people with disabilities face not only the physical challenges of an inaccessible society but also experience the emotional and spiritual pain of exclusion. I began to understand how people with disabilities and other marginalized identities have unique and important perspectives on justice and equity and what it means to be human.

We cannot fully understand other human beings through simple labels and words. Even though we turn to labels as a way to understand people who are different from us, the truth is that human diversity is not reducible or comprehensible - and that is a beautiful, **sacred** thing. Jewish wisdom teaches that we cannot fully understand the mystery of human diversity. And while we should learn from human diversity, we must accept the limits of our understanding and learn to embrace diversity with curiosity, wonder, and gratitude.

The Talmud teaches: “When a human stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But when the Holy Blessed One stamps all people with the seal of *Adam* - the first human, not one of them is similar to another.”<sup>1</sup> We are each meant to be unique, unusual in some way, imperfect yet imbued with sacred dignity, all equally valuable.

This is what Or Atid’s Inclusion Committee as well as the Racial Diversity and Equity Working Group have been helping us understand. They help us better

---

<sup>1</sup> *Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5*

manifest the dignity of human diversity through learning, reflection, action, and change. With their help, we can make our community and our world more inclusive and equitable.

Increasing inclusion is a critically important first step in the journey towards truly embodying *Kevod Ha-Beriyot*, human dignity. We experienced the **complexity** of inclusion and equity at Or Atid as we sought to make our *bimah* wheelchair accessible by lowering it and building a ramp - a significant project that we completed just a few weeks ago, thanks to the generosity, hard work, and leadership of many people, particularly David Fixler, Michael Tichnor, Steve Gershman, and Robin Wolk.

In advance of this project, some people were concerned about sightline issues. This was a real-life example of different needs coming into conflict, due in part to limited time and resources - solutions like gently sloped or stepped seating were not possible at this time. Even with unlimited resources, it may not be possible to meet conflicting needs at the same time in the same space - for example, one person may need bright lights to be able to see, while another person may be sensitive to light and need dim lighting. But with increasing innovation in accessibility, with flexibility and the creation of multiple options and spaces, such conflicting needs can be reconciled in creative and practical ways.

We must engage in inclusion while recognizing that we are seeking to move beyond it. Our ultimate goal is integration and equity. The full embrace of people with diverse abilities, backgrounds, and identities who want to be, or who never imagined they could be, part of our community. When our spaces are more accessible, we can more regularly connect with an increasingly diverse group of people, without the power imbalances that are present in broader society.

Inclusion and equity are the fulfillment of the core Jewish values of *Kevod Ha-Beriyot* - human dignity and the sanctity of human life. The Talmud affirms: “Great is human dignity, for it can override and cancel out a prohibition in the Torah.”<sup>2</sup>

This means that living out the value of human dignity requires us to change our assumptions, even change some customs and traditions, as we actively unlearn ingrained prejudices. It requires us to let go of inherited expectations about decorum. It means accepting discomfort and confusion, recognizing that we will not always understand why someone has a specific accessibility need or connects to Jewish life differently.

I do not have a disability, yet. But since I was six years old, I’ve needed strong prescription eyeglasses to see clearly. I’ve been just a few measurements away from being legally blind. Sooner or later, if we live long enough, we will all

---

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 3b

experience disability in our own lives, whether blindness, deafness, loss of mobility, or cognitive decline. But we don't have to work that hard to imagine the experience of marginalization. We can all remember a time when we felt excluded, ignored, ridiculed, or even hated, because of our identity. We can remember that pain. And, I hope, we can also remember the understanding, support, and love of family members, friends, teachers, and colleagues who helped us heal from the pain of exclusion and who affirmed our inherent human dignity.

We cannot control most of our own traits - the color of our skin, whether or not we are able to see, walk, or hear. The pandemic has emphasized how little control we have, even over our own physical and mental health. We need to apply this lesson to human diversity of all kinds, understanding that we cannot fully control our abilities and disabilities, our body shape and weight, or even our thoughts and fears. And it is a terrible loss when we marginalize so many by expecting everyone to conform to our arbitrary physical and mental standards. Instead, we can learn from diversity, if we can accept it without trying to reduce it to a simple soundbite. And we can increase human connection, freedom, and joy, if we do the inner work of unlearning entrenched biases and assumptions.

These learned biases have obscured the truth that diversity is natural, beautiful, and sacred. A brilliant animated video called "The Danger of Poodle Science," created by renowned eating disorders therapist Dr. Bugard, explains

body diversity and the perils of assessing health and wellness based on assumptions about size. In the video, Dr. Burgard details how absurd it would be if we assessed the health of all dogs by comparing them to the size and health of poodles. Better yet, what if the poodles decided that all other dogs should look, eat, and be the same size as poodles? The video pokes fun at our society's one-size-fits-all orientation toward bodies.<sup>3</sup>

As the author and activist Sonya Renee Taylor puts it: "Health is not a state we owe the world. We are not less valuable, worthy, or lovable because we are not healthy... [and] there is no standard of health that is achievable for all bodies."<sup>4</sup> People with illnesses and disabilities do not have defective bodies - that idea is a social construct. All bodies are different. All people live on a spectrum of ability and disability, with an ebb and flow of health and illness.

The Poodle Science video simplifies systems of oppression - into a humorous yet clear parable. Ableism, which is discrimination in favor of able-bodied people, and all forms of discrimination, tell us in one way or another that we are not good enough. If you can't do certain things, if you don't look or dress a certain way, you're not good enough. We know this is not true. Some people walk. Some people use a wheelchair. Some people are fat. Some are thin. Some are neurotypical. Some are neurodivergent. None of these traits necessarily

---

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *The Body Is Not An Apology*, pp. 23-24

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24

makes anyone better, more worthy, more deserving of respect and love, than anyone else.

This is the message of *Kol Nidrei*. We enter *Yom Kippur* by saying: all of our vows, our promises, our expectations, our assumptions, could prove to be wrong. We cannot fully predict or understand even our own abilities and limitations, let alone those of others. *Kol Nidrei* is an admission and a recognition: ideologies that we have unconsciously accepted, like ableism, are harmful. Things that we thought were forbidden, like using laptops on Shabbat and holidays, turned out to be necessary. And it's not only ok - it's good. It's holy. It's how we learn and grow and survive and thrive. In the words of the late poet and activist Audre Lorde, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."<sup>5</sup>

We can celebrate those differences by naming them and owning them, by asking for what we need. We can cultivate curiosity, and avoid making assumptions about others based on appearance or other surface-level traits. We can learn to share our needs and to seek to meet the needs of others without judgment - in our workplaces, in our communities, with our family and friends, whether we are visual learners or aural learners, whether we have rare medical conditions or common ones, or whether we have any other needs. We dignify ourselves and each

---

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *The Body Is Not An Apology*, p. 23

other when we stay curious, non-judgmental, and flexible, seeking to increase accessibility and equity.

One of my inspirations for my reflections tonight was a lesser-known Hebrew blessing: *Meshaneh Ha-Beriyot*. Jewish law prescribes the recitation of this blessing upon seeing a person or animal with unusual physical traits:

The text of the blessing is:

*Barukh atah Adoshem, Elokeinu Melekh Ha-Olam, Meshaneh Ha-Beriyot.*

Blessed are You, *A-donai*, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who makes creatures different.

This blessing is viewed by some as problematic and condescending. And indeed it can be recited in that way. But this blessing can also remind us that ignoring differences, pretending that they don't exist, tacitly reinforces society's unjust hierarchies.

Remember this blessing the next time you see someone or hear something that seems strange or uncomfortable. This blessing asks us to transform judgment and discomfort into curiosity and appreciation. It invites us to express thankfulness for diversity and to embrace it as part of the mystery of existence. This blessing is a challenge to be mindful, to catch even a subconscious negative reaction, and to turn it into gratitude and awareness of the dignity inherent in each and every being.

There is a spark of divinity within each of us. Difference is not only good - it is divine.

This year, may we challenge and let go of our assumptions about others. May we find healing by embracing and celebrating the mysterious beauty of diversity. In this way, may we affirm and lift up the inherent dignity of each and every human being.

*Le-shanah tovah teihateimu* - may we be sealed for a good new year.