D'var Torah
Parashat Nitzavim
Yom Kippur Morning
September 16, 2021

Dear Friends,

In keeping with time honored Jewish tradition, I want to pose a question that has no wrong answer: "What is a Jew?" Or, to pose the question another way, if I ask you, right now, to picture a Jew, what image comes to mind?

As I said a moment ago, there is no carved in stone answer to this question, and there are two reasons for that. First, there's no single, official recipe for baking a Jewish identity cake. Take your mixing bowl and whisk together ethical and ritual Jewish behaviors, communal identification and spiritual seeking, and some kind of tasty Jew will result, but alas, the recipe fails to specify either the proportions of the ingredients or cooking time that yields "Jewishness." Second, Jewish identity through history is a moving target: shifting, fluid and evolving.

This is healthy and beautiful, because change is an essential characteristic of vitality, of aliveness.

Additionally, the question, "Who is Jewish" is increasingly difficult to answer because as our larger society becomes more aware of its diversity – prompting celebration in some quarters and resistance and fear in others – this increasing diversity has begun to shatter old Jewish norms and expectations. Today's "nice Jewish girl" may very well be a trans, ex-Roman Catholic. Today's nice Jewish boy may be the Asian-American graduate of a Conservative Jewish day school. It's what I like to call "the cracking open of Jewish identity," I am not gnashing my teeth and pulling my hair over this. On the contrary, I find it one of the most exciting and hopeful developments in my thirty-six years in the rabbinate. As my Bubbie, of blessed memory, might have said in her native Yiddish, "*'siz geet fuhr d'Yidden*," "it's Good for the Jews."

As I alluded to in my "nice Jewish boy" and "nice Jewish girl" examples a moment ago, I want to talk about these changes through two of the many shifts in what used to be "normative" Jewish identity: sexuality, and race or ethnicity. Both of these evolving dimensions of Jewish

personhood present challenges to our established Jewish community and its synagogues, JCC's and other institutions. Whether we can meet these challenges is a test of both how relevant Jewish life will be to today's up and coming Jews, and how seriously we take Reform Judaism's favorite verse of Torah, that we "are all created in the image of God."

In the arena of accepting and affirming Jews of varying genders and sexual orientations, our efforts at inclusion and embracing diversity have come a long way. We are succeeding in bringing the warmth, community, acceptance, and excitement of Jewish life to so many LGBTQ people who have been pushed to the margins of other faith communities.

On the other hand, as our President Lori Adelman suggested in her beautiful *Kol Nidrei* address lasts night, mainstream, majority white, Ashkenazi-oriented synagogues have failed to confront and dismantle the attitudes and assumptions that leave many Jews of color feeling unsafe, unheard and unwanted *within* our synagogues and other Jewish spaces. As a result, our synagogues are inflicting pain on far too many

precious Jewish souls. We have a long way to go and a lot of uncomfortable, messy, holy work to do.

Allow me to shamelessly steal the structure of Lori's Adelman's *Kol Nidrei* remarks by first sharing some of the good news. In 1996, twenty-five years ago, I gave a Rosh Hashanah sermon about gay and lesbian inclusion in the Jewish community. I was worried sick the night before I gave that sermon, because it wasn't something I had discussed with too many people at CBI. Additionally, an older generation that had built Congregation Beth Israel, both literally and metaphorically, was still prominent in the Temple's leadership, and I was making all kinds of assumptions about how they would receive a sermon that dealt with homosexuality.

When I go back to read that sermon now, parts of it seem positively quaint, because I felt that I had to argue so strenuously (while simultaneously walking on eggshells) for the dignity of gay personhood. And now, twenty-five years later, at least within nearly all the non-Orthodox Jewish community in America, the dignity and rights of people of all genders and sexual orientations is, well, self-evident. By

the way, that was the first and only sermon I've ever given at Congregation Beth Israel that received a standing ovation, and when I later told a former President of the congregation, Adele Silberberg, of blessed memory, how nervous I had been the night before, she said, "Well, you underestimated your congregation, didn't you?"

That said, it wasn't always that way. In my rabbinic student days at HUC, the Reform seminary in New York that both Rabbi Levy and I attended – although, as she *loves* to point out, she had yet to be born by the time I was ordained – gay and lesbian rabbinic and cantorial students had to be closeted to be ordained. To give you another taste of what it was like back then, a classmate of mine who wanted to apply to be the Rabbi of a gay outreach synagogue in San Francisco was advised by the Placement Director that serving that congregation would "ruin his career opportunities forever."

All that now seems like ancient history. Openly LGBTQ rabbinic and cantorial students are routinely ordained from HUC, the *Reform Rabbi's Manual* features wedding liturgy language to accommodate differing gender identities, and the Union for Reform Judaism has gone on record

countless times supporting full civil rights and marriage equality for people in the LGBTQ community.

Here at CBI, children with LGBTQ parents are happily commonplace, and LGBTQ Temple members, whatever the configuration of their household, hold positions of leadership on committees and our Board Of Trustees. Additionally, *Ga'avah* — Hebrew for "pride" — our CBI affiliate group that serves the needs of our congregation's LGBTQ members, is thriving, which pleases me no end.

Finally, our venerable introduction to Judaism class for adults, which we call Living a Jewish Life, contains a strikingly large cohort of LGBTQ students, many of whom are seriously interested in converting to Judaism. Rabbi Levy and I, who team teach the class, find ourselves both delighted by and curious about this trend. In conversations with some of these students, I've had the chance to learn from them about the intersection of their sexual identity and their attraction to Judaism.

One thread or theme that's emerged in conversations with our LGBTQ adult learners is the trauma they experienced as kids in church. On the landing page of our Temple website, there is a logo of a rainbow Star of

David flanked by the words, "LGBTQ Safe Zone.” For someone who sat in their family church on Sunday morning, hearing words of intolerance and condemnation from the pulpit, seeing that little JPEG graphic is like being hugged by people you haven't yet met.

Another thread in these conversations has been centered around family. "When you are gay," one of the students told me, "your most important family may be the one you create and choose for yourself, especially if your biological family couldn't fully accept who you are. So, finding a religious community that loves and accepts you as you are, can be such a head start in creating that family of choice."

Finally, students have spoken of the dignity and agency they feel in choosing to be part of a Jewish community that, like the LGBTQ community, has had a history of marginalization, and has channeled that suffering into the commandment to welcome all who are marginalized, all who are strangers.

So, that's the "good news" side of the ledger. As an American Jewish community writ large, and as a congregation, we have made great strides

in welcoming LGBTQ individuals to our community, and they are responding to that welcome with their presence.

Now we get to the painful part. *Al chet she-chatanu lefanekha*, the sin we have committed before You, God, by failing to confront the racism that exists *within* Jewish communal spaces.

Racism within the Jewish community? How is that possible? We progressive Jews deplore crimes of violence and dehumanization perpetrated disproportionately against people of color. We are quick to call out the crude, naked, violent racism of white supremacist groups. We rant and commiserate on social media about the increasing acceptability of racist, xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric from our elected officials. We deplore systemic racism, whether in the form of the murder of unarmed, black men and women by police, or in the form of institutional discrimination in the banking industry and city housing codes.

Our synagogues host special Shabbat services on Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial weekend. We read inspirational King quotations and celebrate the involvement of so many Jews in the civil rights movement of the

1960s. We recall with reverence the example of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched shoulder to shoulder with Martin Luther King, Junior during the Selma bus boycott, a march that Heschel famously said "felt like praying with his legs." We honor Kivvie Kaplan, a Reform Jew and passionate civil rights crusader. Kaplan served on the board of two Historically Black Colleges and toured the United States speaking on civil rights and raising funds for the NAACP, which he served as President from 1966 until his death in 1975. And we say Kaddish for Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, both Jews, and their fellow volunteer, a young black man named James Earl Chaney, all murdered by Klansmen in Mississippi during Freedom Summer, for registering black people to vote.

And yet, these MLK Shabbat services in which we so enthusiastically quote Heschel and King, can easily sink into comforting, pious nostalgia for things that happened sixty years ago. Indeed, these feel-good events can *deflect* our energies from taking a serious look at the ways the mainstream Jewish community has largely abandoned the relentless,

uncomfortable "creative maladjustment[1]" to racism, poverty and violence that Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel championed.

Outside our synagogues and JCC's, in the larger world, it is easy for the white and white passing Jews among us to decry the obvious, crude, violent racism chronicled on cable news. Voicing our disgust and wagging our fingers in disapproval at white supremacist rallies is easy, morally self-congratulatory and free of risk. Confronting how the white, Jewish community has benefited and continues to benefit from entrenched, systemic discrimination against people of color, and then committing ourselves to working to help dismantle that oppression, is much more difficult and uncomfortable.

This is why we have an entire season of the year, right now, devoted to *teshuvah*, repentance and change, because honest self-examination and

[1] "We must never adjust ourselves to economic conditions that take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few," King insisted. He called for "creative maladjustment," wherein people refuse to normalize inequality and work continuously to expose injustice so that, "we may be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man, into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice." https://progressive.org/latest/martin-luther-kings-creative-maladjustment-resonates-today/

summoning a commitment to personal change is so difficult, and therefore so tempting to avoid.

And here I hasten to make an important point. The *vidui*, the communal confessing of sins that we repeat so many times on Yom Kippur, isn't a list of labels or personality defects, but rather an inventory of *destructive behaviors*. We don't say, "we are disrespectful," but rather, "we have shown disrespect to our parents and teachers." We don't declare, "we are judgmental," but rather, "we have arrogantly passed judgment on others." *Chet*, the Hebrew word for “sin,” literally means "missing the mark." *It is a behavior that we work to change because Judaism insists that we are capable of changing our behavior*. And the prayer book deliberately mentions things we have done *b’mezid*, intentionally, and things we have done *bish’gaga*, without knowing it. So, to my fellow white, Ashkenazi Jews, no, your rabbi didn't “call you a racist." Your Rabbi said that the white, conventional Jewish community has treated its brother and sister Jews of color in ways that have been inhospitable, presumptuous and humiliating, and that Yom Kippur calls us to change that behavior. The point of Yom Kippur is that changing our destructive

behavior is within our reach if we are willing to wake up to the sound of the shofar and do the hard work of *teshuvah*.

This brings us to a manifestation of white, Jewish racism that is very intimate and close to home, which makes confronting it both difficult and urgent to discuss. I am referring to the growing body of testimony by Jews of color, speaking the truth of having experienced racism in majority white, Jewish spaces, especially in synagogues like ours. Shekhinya Larks is a black Jew who is active on Tik Tok and other social media platforms. She is also on the staff of *Bechol Lashon*, an organization that for twenty years has been working to honor and celebrate ethnic and racial diversity within the global Jewish community. In a viral Tik Tok video she posted last January, she said, "I share space with [white Jews. And when I do,] I have to worry about the same things that I have to worry about when I share space with white gentiles. When I get done experiencing antisemitism and racism from white gentiles, I want to come to my *mishpacha* — my Jewish family — for safety. It's hard to feel safe, when I'm done dealing with that, to come [to *shul*] and deal with racism from you. I do see and note that

there are those of you who are trying to do better, but it's not enough of you. There needs to be a paradigm shift in this community if we're going to make all Jews feel safe."

Sadly, members of CBI have brought to our attention that they, too, have been on the receiving end of both blatantly racist and naively ignorant comments, from CBI members. It makes the motto on our Temple website, and on the screen that you're watching right now – "Congregation Beth Israel: Joyful, Diverse, Inclusive" – sound like hollow marketing rather than a set of aspirations to which we are committed in both word and deed.

I know that this is hard to hear – heck, it's hard for me to *say* – and that some of us may bristle and think, "I'm not that person, that Jew making Jews of color feel unsafe" – just like we may read some of the sins in the *vidui* and think, "Why am I confessing to something I'm sure I haven't done?" So, here's a thought experiment for the white, Ashkenazi Jews, like me, in our midst.

Imagine that we *were* able to be in our beloved sanctuary at this moment. Imagine that there was a young, black man sitting across the

aisle from you among the throngs of Yom Kippur worshipers. He is wearing a colorful yarmulke on his head, draped in a beautiful *talit*, and enthusiastically singing along with our cantor and choir. His Hebrew is flawless. Consumed with curiosity about this person, you approach him over a piece of kugel at the break the fast, wish him *l'shanah tovah*, and then say, "Golly, I bet *you* have an interesting story to tell!"

What have you just told him? That he is different, even exotic. That he doesn't fit in. That he is an object of your curiosity and not a human being and a Jew among Jews. To quote another Jew of color, an interaction like that "feels like a gut punch." And if memory serves, I'm mortified to admit that I've likely said similar things to unfamiliar faces at the Oneg Shabbat, in an eagerness to be welcoming, but quite probably making the person feel as if they are being singled out, as if they don't truly belong. Add to this scenario the countless, true stories told by Black Jews in particular of being approached by synagogue members after a Shabbat service and being asked to put out some more chairs because someone assumed that a black person at Shabbat services must be on the custodial staff. I hope you are cringing right now.

Fortunately, the worldwide Jewish community has begun to wake up to the challenge of confronting stereotypes and prejudice against Jews of color, whether black, Latino, Asian, Native American, Southeast Asian, East Indian, or any of the other beautiful kinds of Jews in our own communities. I already mentioned the Jewish diversity and inclusion work of Bechol Lashon, which you can learn more about at globaljews.com. They provide speakers, resources and training in helping to make synagogues and other Jewish spaces safe and truly welcoming to all Jews. Additionally, another organization called the Jews of Color Initiative sponsored and just released a survey of over 1100 American Jews of color. The report is entitled Beyond the Count. Here are a few takeaways from the survey:

1) A vast majority, 80%, of Jews of Color who participated in the survey said they have experienced discrimination in Jewish communal settings, more than half of them in synagogues or congregations. 45% agree that they have altered how they speak, dress, or present themselves in predominantly white Jewish spaces. 60% agree they have felt tokenized in Jewish communal settings.

2) 46% of respondents said that talking about the experience of being a Jew of Color with other Jews of Color is very important to them. Yet 36% of respondents said they have no close friends who are Jews of Color…When Jews of Color are able to connect with one another… the result can be transformative and healing for many.
3) Beyond the Count participants were asked to identify which expressions of Jewish identity were "very important" to them. The top five most-selected responses were:

    Working for justice and equality (Tikkun Olam)

    Passing on Jewish identity to the next generation

    Honoring their parents, grandparents, and/or ancestors

    Remembering the Holocaust

    Celebrating Jewish holidays

The survey also dispels a number of myths about Jews of color. It's a myth, for example, that most Jews of Color converted. Fact check: 65% of participants were raised Jewish. (However, the survey points out, much work needs to be done to challenge stigma that continues to be attached to conversion—despite the fact that such a stigma goes against

Jewish law —specifically for Jews of Color who are indeed Jews by Choice).

It's also a myth that Jews of Color aren't in synagogues because there aren't any Jews of Color around or they just aren't engaged in the Jewish community. Fact check: Among Beyond the Count participants, 60% are currently or have previously been a regular volunteer in Jewish organizations or synagogues. 49% say at least half of their closest friends are Jewish. So, if our Jewish brothers and sisters of color our keeping their distance from synagogues, we again need to ask what's going on within our synagogues that is turning them away.

Finally, the survey finds that it's a myth that Jews of Color can be lumped into one monolithic group. Participants' diversity shines through every aspect of the Beyond the Count findings, from differing experiences of racism to diverse perspectives on Israel, or even on the term "Jews of Color" itself. There is no single "Jews of Color" perspective, identity, or experience.

I wanted to also mention that the work of reckoning with and repairing racism within the organized Jewish community is not confined to the

United States. In the UK in April of this year, the Board of Deputies of British Jews released a report produced by its Commission on Racial Inclusivity in the Jewish Community. Even without getting into the fine points of the British report, the chapter headings themselves are revealing. In the section entitled Representation, Leadership and Media, there are chapters on Visibility [of Jewish diversity] In Jewish Communal Bodies, Visibility in the Jewish Media, Visibility in the Rabbinate, as well as a chapter on How Jewish Organizations Represent the Concerns of a Racially Diverse Community. The report also contains an entire section called Creating Welcoming Communal Spaces, with separate chapters on Security, Conversion, Synagogues, Cultural Spaces, Shops and Restaurants, Youth Organizations, and Adult Education and Outreach Organizations.

Closer to home, our own Union for Reform Judaism has launched a major Jewish Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiative, providing guidance and resources for Reform congregations like ours that are resolving to do the uncomfortable yet essential work of making the congregation a safe space for all Jews of all backgrounds.

Friends, I am completely committed to this work, as is our administrative staff, Clergy Team and our Temple Board. We are all going participate in Jewish Diversity, Equity and Inclusion training in the months ahead, and you, too, will have the opportunity to do this kind of work by participating in one of our Chavuraction Circles and other efforts. As Lori mentioned last night, be on the lookout for more information on these programs in the coming weeks.

I am humbled both by the urgency, enormity and importance of the task at hand. I am also humbled by the knowledge that I have so much to learn, and I know that the learning will ask much of me as a rabbi and a Jewish human being. Please, please, I beg you, stand beside me and join me in doing this sacred work. Let us listen together and learn together. Let us be open and vulnerable with each other. Let us commit ourselves to making Congregation Beth Israel a safe and sacred tabernacle, a refuge from prejudice and hate, a place where every kind of Jew experiences the healing embrace of true respect, welcome and belonging. In making this effort, in doing this holy work,

may we fulfill the vision of the opening verse of this morning's Torah reading, "You are stationed here today, *all of you*, to enter God's covenant." Amen.