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Congregation Beth Am
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Parashat Terumah

D'var Torah for Jewish Inclusion Month

Middle.
School.
Dances.

You remember those?
The anticipation.
The anxiety.
The what will I wear?
The when should we arrive discussions?
The wall-flowering.
The slow-dances.
(This is how we slow danced then.)
I don't know how middle schoolers slow dance now.
Do they slow-dance?
With a daughter in the seventh-grade I'm not sure if I want to know.

At least once in life everyone needs a cool English teacher.
Mine was Pam Schreiber, my English teacher in 7th and 8th grade.
With her, we read Romeo and Juliet.
With Ms. Schreiber, we also learned to dance:
she taught all of us how to dance together.
Ms. Schreiber loved Prince, and that year Prince's single, When Doves Cry, was BIG.
So "Dig If you will the picture":

1984.
Brookline, MA.
Heath School's Cafeteria.
The collapsible tables with stools attached to them--those were new then--are folded up
against one brick wall.
The lights are low.
And the dance floor is empty as Safety Dance, by Men Without Hats played.
But then Prince's latest hit came on, and Ms. Schreiber entered that empty chasm of linoleum,
inviting all of us to join her.

And she actually got all of the seventh-grade dancing together in a circle.
I remember this move (show move).
and then there was the soloing across the middle:

that took guts.

It was risky;

But all of us smiled and laughed as my classmates danced their way from one side of the circle to the other.

Ms. Schreiber's ability to ensure that an entire seventh grade danced together was a remarkable act of inclusion.

If you can do that with a bunch of seventh graders,

to break-down cliques

to diminish their perceived differences

even for just 3 minutes and 47 seconds,

you've done something remarkable,

memorable.

And here I am,

38 years later

remembering that small, yet powerful moment.

What prompted these memories of middle school dances was a saying of Verna Myers:

"Diversity is being invited to the Party; Inclusion is being Asked to Dance."

This Shabbat marks the beginning of Focus on Inclusion Month at Beth Am.

Verna Myers is a Diversity and Inclusion expert who has made an important point about today's companies and the challenge of being inclusive:

More than ever before, as professionals have longer careers, today's businesses are frequently intergenerational workplaces that require co-workers to negotiate perceived generational divides and rapid shifts in attitudes towards diversity and inclusion.

Beth Am too is an intergenerational workplace.

Yes: 21 of us are paid to work here.

And we are an inter-generational team that has begun to incorporate into our workplace methods developed outside of the synagogue world that are aiding us in our efforts to confront our implicit biases about disabilities, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

But in speaking tonight about the Beth Am workplace, I mean something broader:

For Beth Am, as a synagogue community,

is an intergenerational workplace in which we engage in *avodah*, sacred work.

We labor, together,

to imbue the world with *qedushah*,

with holiness.

As with many of today's businesses,

Reform synagogues in America, like Beth Am,

comprise ever diversifying populations of workers:

interfaith families, congregants of color, of patrilineal descent,
of different ages,
of varied sexual and gender identities,
of congregants with mobility impairments,
of differing cognitive abilities,
people with mental illness,
varied socio-economic backgrounds,
and family configurations,
of wide-ranging learning styles,
of physical abilities,
experiences,
professions,
and
desires.

But here lies a problem:

The ancient foundations of Judaism were not designed to support this ever-expanding, inclusive conception of Jewish life. Our biblical and rabbinic predecessors could not have ever imagined the community that we are.

To respond to the glorious diversification of the Jewish community,
We are challenged to retrofit our traditions:
to redefine age-old terms,
To continually excavate our past in order to uncover
The imagery
The memories
The actions
Which ensure that we not only invite everybody to the party,
but that all
are being asked
to dance.

This can be heavy lifting.

Helpfully, Reform Jews are particularly adept at doing this interpretive work:
of discovering within our traditions and texts
approaches to fulfilling our mission
of being a house for all people,
of constructing on top of the old,
more flexible foundations for our theologies and actions.

Here are two brief examples of what I mean.

Consider the action of *teshuvah*.

We often view *teshuvah*, repentance, as a corrective:
we do *teshuvah* during the High Holy Days as a response to transgression.
It is a reactive process of maintenance and repair.
Yet there is a broader,
year-round,
proactive conception of *teshuvah*,
that is more productive,
inclusive,
one that leads to a translation of *teshuvah*
as taking actions towards personal and communal transformation.
This broader conception of *teshuvah* enables us to recognize
a fundamental commonality that binds us as a collective, while not diminishing our diversity.

Regardless of our individual identities
we have all engaged with synagogue life seeking betterment.
Implicitly
Or
Explicitly.
To enter our community is to take a step, one way or another, along a lifelong path of *teshuvah*;
The pathways are as multitudinous as the individuals that have come into this House.
In short, we are all here seeking the same thing:
Improvement.
Each at our own pace, along individual and ever intersecting pathways,
we are moving together on an upward spiral of communal existence.

Here is a second example:

B'tzelem Elohim.

You know this frequently referenced idea from Genesis 1.
In that creation story, God imbues human beings with divinity (Gen 1:27): we are made in God's
image -- בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים.
Wonderfully, what this image looks like is left unstated.
Yet the story implies that humans are representations of God's presence and power.
As one scholar has put it, "The manifold diversity of humanity
not only attests to the creativity of the creator,"
but also protects,
"Against associating [God] with any single form."¹

Humans
are,
in a word,
God's *selem*.

¹ See Hulster, 194.

But to translate *selem* solely as “image” is to reduce the dimensionality of the description.
For *selem* means “form”.

Thus

we are not merely *images* of God,
2 dimensional pictures,

No.

we are *selamim*,
forms,

fully embodied representations of God.

But there is more,

an additional facet of *B'tzelem Elohim*,
an implication that is often left unsaid,

but one that may serve to ground our work of becoming an ever more inclusive community.

To conceptualize our relationship with God

using the paradigm of *Btzelem Elohim*

signifies a bi-directional reflective process.

If *we* are fully embodied representations of God,

then God is our *selem*, or *selamim*, a composition of forms as multitudinous and as diverse as
we.

Humans and God: We mirror one another.

And if this is so,

Then consider our covenant an eternal choreography.

A pas de deux.

You and God.

All of us reflected by God.

Whoever you are,

How ever you are,

God reflects you,

us,

our actions:

God dances when we dance.

Psalm 149 Begins with these words:

תְּלִלוּ לַיהוָה | שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ תְּהַלְלוּ בְּקִהְל חַסִּידִים :

Praise God.

Sing to God a new song

Sing God's praises in the congregation of the faithful.

Beth am is a *kahal chasidim*,

a community of the faithful,

a congregation committed to the ongoing *avodah* of inclusion.

In part,

we demonstrate our commitment through our annual Focus on Inclusion Month. Our Inclusion Committee, chaired by Melissa Kelley, has assembled a variety of programs for the month of February, designed to educate and inspire action around inclusion in our community and in the world. Our inclusion work is dialogical.

The biggest request we had from participants in our Jewish Inclusion month last year was to bring workshops to Beth Am on gender identity, sexual orientation and related topics.

These requests came from all kinds of folks at Beth Am, and as Melissa wrote in a Builder article, "You asked and we listened!"

Next week, at Qabbalat Shabbat, our member, Jackie Pelavin, will speak about her experience as the mother of a transgender child.

Following the service, there will be a discussion via Zoom with Jackie and her husband, Mark Cohen.

Later in the month, and in conjunction with Keshet, an organization dedicated to promoting LGBTQ equality in the Jewish community, we are offering two workshops that will focus on awareness and understanding of identities across the LGBTQ continuum, and how we as a Jewish community may act on our values as allies for transgender, nonbinary, gender-expansive, lesbian, gay, bisexual and other queer folks, both at Beth Am and beyond.

These are just a few of a *wide-range* of programmatic offerings for Focus on Inclusion Month. You can learn more, online.

But as with Teshuvah, our individual and communal acts of inclusion, are not limited to a single month; we engage in these efforts year-round.

Daily.

And so on this shabbat, we recommit ourselves to evolving our workplace, as an inclusive sanctuary, where all are asked to dance, And where all may join together in the communal actions described by Psalm 149:

Sing to God a new song
Sing God's praises in the congregation of the faithful.

And the Psalm continues:
הִלְלוּ שֵׁמוֹ בְּמִחּוֹל בְּתוֹף וּבְזוֹר יִמְרוּ-לוֹ!

Sing to God;
Praise God's name,
With drum,

With lyre,
And with *machol*,
Praise God,
with dance.