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Kol Rinah
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I was happy, and unsurprised, to read that Jews have the lowest level of vaccine hesitancy of any religious group in America. Approximately 85% of Jews in America are vaccinated or plan to get vaccinated, about fifteen percentage points higher than other Americans generally (<https://forward.com/news/473643/jews-accept-covid-vaccine-religious-groups-survey/>).

This, by the way, conforms to what we've found about our congregation, that about 98% of our eligible congregants who have responded to the two surveys we've done, are vaccinated.

Perhaps this should be a small point of Jewish pride for us. But. In this area, I'd be thrilled if other ethnic and religious groups were even more likely than us to be vaccinated. That would actually be good for America, and for the world, and good for the health of the Jews. We only can be proud because others aren't as good as us.

Thus, our pride is not so much on an absolute basis, as on a relative basis. And if one digs deeper and looks at the data that that article is based on, we find that while other groups are increasing their vaccine acceptance, ours is steady—we're good, but we're not getting better.

In some sense, this is precisely what the Torah warns us about in the first verse we read today:

דברים פרק ט

(ד) אֵלֵינוּ אָמַר בְּלִבְבְּךָ בְּהַדְרֵךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אַתֶּם | מִלְפָּנֶיךָ לֵאמֹר בְּצַדִּיקוֹתַי הִבִּיאֵנִי ה' לְרִשְׁתָּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וּבְרִשְׁעֹתֵי הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה ה' מוֹרִישָׁם מִפְּנֵיךָ :

Deuteronomy 9:4

And when the LORD your God has thrust them from your path, say not to yourselves, "The LORD has enabled us to possess this land because of our virtues"; it is rather because of the wickedness of those nations that the LORD is dispossessing them before you.

Moses is reminding the people that their success in expelling those living in the land of Israel won't be because the Israelites are so terrific, but because others are so terrible.

Has anyone been watching the Olympics recently? No Olympic athlete wants to win a gold medal because all the other competitors are just terrible at their sport. An athlete wants to win because they have trained hard and well, and excelled against the toughest and best competition. No one wants to win the 800 meter anything against Noah Arnow.

I'll make a small point about the state of Israel. Is it enough for Israel to be the only real democracy in the Middle East, to be the Middle Eastern country that's the most friendly to LGBTQ people, that guarantees rights to all of its citizens?

Just because Israel is better than its neighbors doesn't mean it's good enough, and doesn't mean that Israel cannot, must not, still strive to improve in the way it treats its minorities.

One of the favorite activities of medieval Jewish scholars was to count the commandments, and to figure out which ones, exactly, are the 613. Some, everyone agreed

about. Others are only on certain lists. The mitzvah not to say that we are where we are because we're so terrific is counted by some, and not by others, but according at least to a few authorities (see Sefer Yirai'im 261 and Sefer Mitzvot Katan 14), this is one of the big 613.

I want to make two observations about the syntax of this verse. First, it says don't say בלבבך, in your heart—or as it's translated, "to yourselves." The Torah is not warning us about telling others how great we are. It's warning us about telling ourselves—whether speaking out loud to other Jews, or just quietly speaking to ourselves, in our hearts. This is about internal conversation. And the idea is that we should have a deep sense of humility about the ways we have done wrong, and that we are not yet doing right, in an absolute, and not a relative sense. Because the Torah knows that we have this self-congratulatory impulse, Jews, and probably everyone.

And one more note about the syntax of the verse. The English translation, in your Etz Hayyim chumash, and that I read to you, glosses over a superfluous word. More literally, it says, "Do not say in your heart, when the Lord pushes them away from before you, saying, "Because of my righteousness...etc." *Don't say in your heart... saying.* That second "saying," לאמור, is unnecessary—it could have just said, "Don't say in your heart..." The extra "saying," could imply an extended action, something that happens repeatedly, over time, something that is a pattern, a habit, perhaps.

I don't think this is telling us not to celebrate one moment of Jewish pride even every thousand years. Rather, it's saying don't make a habit of it, don't always tell yourselves that you are better, superior. Don't let it become a pattern, a regular thought process, a habit.

This is not to say we shouldn't be proud to be Jewish, and be proud of what we have accomplished. We should be proud to be Jewish. We should be proud of all Jews have accomplished. We should be proud of what our congregation as accomplished, and what each of us has accomplished. But let that pride not be about being better than others. Let it be about being who it is that we are called, and commanded to be.

Shabbat shalom.