

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
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In the beginning, God created the world. But then God destroyed it, and created another one. And destroyed that one and created another one. And created another, and another, and another, and destroyed them all. So Rabbi Abbahu said in a midrash 1700 years ago (Genesis Rabbah 9:2). And then God created this one, this world we have inherited, and saw that it was good enough not to destroy, but to keep, and to work on. And it's the creation of this world, with all of its potential, realized and as yet unrealized, that we celebrate on Rosh Hashanah.

But the creation story is just the beginning of the Torah, which we will begin again on Simchat Torah. Everything was perfect for that seventh day, on which God rested. But the Torah didn't end with creation because very quickly it became obvious that the world was not in fact finished and perfect (see Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel), but required constant effort to maintain, and to make more perfect. The world, God realized, would be a permanent work in progress, never completed in human history -- but with God's nudging, moving ever closer to a world suffused with justice, kindness, holiness and peace. The Torah is a blueprint for working toward that world, each of us as individuals, and as communities, moving inch by inch, sometimes two inches forward, and one back, toward a more perfect world.

The world is a work in progress, and so are we--as individuals, as a kehilah kedosha, as the sacred community of Kol Rinah, and as a Jewish people.

Many of us can reflect on previous Rosh Hashanahs, sitting in this exact room or in a room similar (or not similar at all) reflecting on the changes we are trying to put into action for ourselves. What are some of the ways you can notice yourself as a work in progress? What have you improved at, what has become easier, what have you mastered? It's ok to have some pride about that!

Even as we're progressing, we're always challenged by new interests, new realizations, and new needs that arise in our lives. Maybe it's learning how to take care of someone ill in your family, or how to live your new normal with acute or chronic pain or illness. Maybe it's a new career, or retirement, or having the kids out of the house that invite self-reexamination. Maybe it's a sense of boredom, of lack of purpose that can inspire us to do more or differently. What is one specific way you are a work in progress today?

Kol Rinah is a work in progress too. We merged, we sold a building, we sold another building and bought a church, and yet we're still here, hoping by the end of next year to be in our new home. That's a lot of progress! But we're still a work in progress because even when we move in, our new home will not yet be everything we dream of yet. It will have potential--great potential. But it will still be a work in progress. We have (much) more work to do always reach higher as a congregation that builds on our culture of inclusion, of respect, of care and concern, for each other, and for others outside the congregation. We can be proud of everything we do, and also unsatisfied, knowing we can do better. That's what it means to be a work in progress.

And then there's the Jewish people. We've always been a work in progress, in discerning God's voice and God's will in our sacred texts, in responding to God's will and God's voice in our lives, with our lives.

We've had to change ourselves dramatically because of adversity, whether unpleasant or murderous. For a long time, we were unable to really consider what it means to be an *or lagoyim*, a light unto the nations, in Isaiah's words. When your neighbors hate you, working with them is not a live option.

But that's changing. And I want to suggest that we as Jews view people who aren't Jewish is a timely and important work in progress.

But first, a story.

Six rabbis, six imams and six evangelical pastors walk into an Episcopalian retreat center in Columbia, Illinois. Sorry to disappoint you, but it's not the beginning of a joke. Rather, it's what happened the last two days in August. I was, as you guessed, one of the rabbis, and we, all clergy in St. Louis, came together to get to know each other in a multifaith context. Before this, I was acquainted with a couple of Muslim clergy, and I know many Christian clergymembers, but almost no Evangelical Christians.

But that's exactly why we were there--because none of us gets together much, and we are really, really, really different. We all have so much to learn, and so many important bridges to build across our differences.

So I will ask a somewhat uncomfortable question: What's the Jewish word for someone not Jewish? "Goy." We say it a little uncomfortably, because that word has fallen out of our lexicon of acceptable words. It's become a pejorative, negative. The English term, gentile, isn't as pejorative, but we never hear it used in actual speech or conversation.

The problem with the word, "goy" may be its use in punchlines that contrast Jews and others, A whole chapter in the Big Book of Jewish Humor, which I grew up reading is "The Jewish and The Goyish." Jokes, we know, reveal some of our most deeply held feelings and long-retained sensitivities.

But these stereotypes are not actual people who aren't Jewish. They are the image of the other, as constructed in Jewish culture.

A group's identity is made of boundaries; and boundaries are necessary for the group to create itself, theorists suggest. "Therefore, it is not the real other who is at stake but rather his or her image and their role in the psychological economy of the self, both private and collective."

That's why the category of goy doesn't actually ring true, but feels empty--because it is a hollow category. Even the phrase in Hebrew that's often used for it, אינו יהודי, means someone who is defined only by absence, what they are not--not Jewish, with no actual qualities of presence.

In fact, the constructed category of the goy, or non-Jew, likely says much more about us than about the actual figure of the gentile.

And it is a constructed category. The word *goy* in the Bible simply means nation, as you know. לא ישא גוי אל גוי חרב. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Israel itself is a goy, in the Bible. So where does the word *goy* begin to be used systematically to refer to the individual, generic, non-Jew? In the letters of Paul, in the New Testament, as it turns out, according to a new study, called, *Goy: Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile*, by

two Israeli scholars, Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi. They argue that Paul, as he was trying to build Christianity, needed a category to contrast with the category “Jew.”

The rabbis of the Mishna and Talmud continue to use the word in that now-familiar fashion, perhaps, to create a new self as they are refashioning Judaism after the Temple’s destruction, re-creating Jews in contradistinction to an imagined other.

You may be relieved to know that those boundaries have been destabilized so many times, in so many ways. For example, the paradigm in the Talmud of one who honors his parents is a non-Jew named Dama ben Netina. Dama ben Netina has just the right stones for the ephod, the High Priest’s breastplate, and is offered a king’s fortune for them, but he declines, because the key he needs to get to them is under the pillow of his sleeping father, whom he does not want to wake.

And here’s a super interesting little historical tidbit. Pay attention here! Because of Christian censors, and also internal Jewish pressure, references in the Talmud to non-Jews, to *goyim*, were changed in the middle ages to refer to idol worshippers, עובדי עבודה זרה, and star worshippers, עובדי כוכבים, that is to say, not Christians or Muslims. So, in some sense, the category of “goy,” has already been greatly narrowed, halakhically, if not culturally.

Today, we share space with a church, and we work on behalf of Muslims, and we live amidst people of many faiths and no faith. We have people who aren’t Jewish in our families, in our homes. They are our partners, our children, our in-laws, our grandchildren, our parents, our siblings, and some people here today. And I’m so glad you’re here!

How we construct our relationship with people who aren’t Jewish is a work that needs progress.

The remedy to a constructed, homogenized other is seeing people as people, as with us and not against us, and seeing and appreciating difference. We need to know people different from us better, and more deeply. And the more we know people deeply, the more we appreciate the differences in them, and between us. I was struck last week by what Larry Hoffman, one of the great scholars of Jewish liturgy and modern Judaism wrote about particularism and universalism: “What threatens our world today is not unmitigated individualism, so much as it is the burning question of the extent to which individuals throughout the world choose particularistic allegiance to their tribe alone rather than universalistic responsibility to the rest of humankind.”

Those six rabbis, imams and pastors--we are all hoping that we, and eventually our congregations will come together to socialize, to eat, to play (or watch play, like the Cardinals), and to work, whether building a house, or picking up trash, or working on something bigger.

The place to start in any project, though, is with ourselves--in our own homes, in our own hearts, in our own hopes, and in our own prayers.

Our siddurim and machzorim come preprinted with a small but significant way to make a change, to make progress.

Maybe you’ve noticed in this machzor, as well as the siddur we use every Shabbat, the last line of the Kaddish, Oseh Shalom, has some brackets, around the phrase, “V’al Kol Yoshevi Tevel.” We are used to saying, “Oseh Shalom Bimromav, may the one who makes peace in the heavens, hu yaaseh shalom aleinu, make peace over us, v’al kol yisrael, over all Israel, vimru amen, and let us say Amen. The phrase in brackets, “v’al kol yoshevi tevel,” means “and over

all who dwell on earth.” By adding what’s in the bracket, we’re no longer praying only for peace for us, and all Israel, but for everyone.

This addition originated in the Reconstructionist movement 30 years ago, has become standard in the Reform movement, and in much of the Conservative movement too. It wouldn’t be in our new siddurim and machzorim if it weren’t.

Why are these the last brackets standing, so to speak? We’ve made changes to our liturgy before -- such as including the matriarchs, adding the imahot, in the amidah prayer. but why have we resisted this change?

However sacred the Amidah is, Kaddish, whether Kaddish Shalem or Mourner’s Kaddish, is infinitely more so. Of course, that’s backwards from the way halakhah, Jewish law, views things. Changing the words of the blessings of the Amidah is far more significant halakhically than adding to the kaddish. The Kaddish, and its emergence as a prayer for mourners, is a relative innovation, compared to the Amida, whose forms were set down in Talmudic times.

However, tampering with words that are so familiar runs the risk of alienating people precisely at the moments when they are most looking for home, most looking for comfort, familiarity, and order.

So, in certain ways, changing kaddish is far more challenging.

So, this change is not a decree, but an invitation. I’ll be making this change, and I guarantee I’ll forget sometimes, but in my personal and public recitations of kaddish, I’ll be adding *v’al kol yoshvei tevel*, praying for peace for all Israel AND for all who dwell on earth.

I invite you all to join me in those words when you hear me say them. I invite you to say them yourselves when you are reciting the kaddish, and when you are leading others in reciting the kaddish. I invite you to think about what it means to broaden this prayer for peace. But this is a choice, an option, that I will be exercising, and that I know not everyone will choose to exercise, or will remember to exercise. That’s ok.

What might the effect be on us of praying for the peace of Israel and all who dwell on earth? Words that we say, over and over and over and over and over somehow, eventually penetrate our hearts, our thoughts, our unconscious, and our conscience. Imagine the way that stalactites are formed, by dripping that happens over the course of an unbelievably long time, and in the way that erosion very slowly can destroy a mountain. We are slowly eroding one, unhelpful idea, and replacing it with another, that I think feels truer, healthier.

Rosh Hashanah is the very day that we’re supposed not to be thinking about ourselves, but about the whole world. If we imagine concentric circles of our concern, for ourselves, our family, our extended family, our neighborhood, etc., we draw that circle of concern infinitely widely today on Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the whole world. (On Yom Kippur, in contrast, we draw it infinitely narrowly, focusing on the self.)

The Torah reading today is about the original Israelite family, but also about families in general, and also about God’s concern for Hagar and Ishmael, this woman and child who are not part of the covenant.

The shofar is to remind us of Abraham’s absolute devotion to God, and God’s reciprocal devotion to the Jewish people. But the shofar is also to speak not in Jewish language, not in Hebrew or Yiddish or Aramaic or Ladino, and not in Latin or Greek or Arabic or English, but to speak, to communicate in tones that are partially human, partially animal--to bridge that gap between all creatures that have breath, that dwell on this earth.

This day, and every day, let us be people who pray for ourselves, and for others too.

Say it with me, Oseh Shalom bimromav, hu yaaseh shalom, aleinu v'al kol yisrael v'al kol yoshvei tevel, v'imru amen.

These words are an affirmation of seeing ourselves, and everyone in our world, as filled with great potential, as works in progress, and as deserving of peace as we are.

May it be a sweet year, of work, and progress for all of us, for all Israel, and for all who dwell on earth.

Shana tova.