

Loyalty Towards our Differences

Who is a loyal Jew? Who is a loyal American? Who is committed to making America great? (I didn't know these were jokes.) There are numerous individuals and groups who are more than ready to stand up and say, "I, and I alone, know who is a good Jew; I know who is a loyal citizen; I know who loves Israel." Throughout this past year, we have witnessed elected officials make vile suggestions of dual loyalty while crouching behind the flag of free speech. The accusation recalls old anti-Semitic tropes that we are never to be trusted. There is also an elected official that claims we can only be loyal Jews if we subscribe to one political platform. To advocate or vote otherwise would be a badge of dishonor. I have heard it said that these five individuals do not represent the majority of any political party. I have also heard it said that some of these individuals may not remain in office beyond 2020. What isn't being said, what I believe to be far more dangerous, is the attitude towards difference in our country. Difference in opinion is not plaguing our society, the stain is how we respond and treat those whose opinions differ from ours. Increasingly, the discourse around difference is undermining social cohesion and causing profound communal bifurcation.

Difference is a given. As we read in our *mahzor*: "Human beings stamp many coins with one die and they all look alike, but the Holy One stamped every human being with the die of Adam, yet no person is like any other." Our tradition teaches us that just as human beings look different so too are our minds and thoughts different. Given that we have such profound difference, what is it that creates the social fabric of our nation? What is it that makes "us" an "us" – whether that "us" is a family, a community, a synagogue, a political party, or American citizens. What makes belonging *here* meaningful and distinct from belonging *there*?

At times communities try to identify a particular x-factor – something, a principle, a belief, a practice which everybody who calls themselves by a certain name has to accept. For example, most Americans have a barbecue on July 4th. Lovely! Most Jews attend a Passover Seder. Mazel Tov! Do either of these activities inspire unity? While we look for something that people share, more often than not, the way social structures maintain some measure of cohesion is not by yearning to find that which we share, but trying to identify the boundaries – the red lines – which we all agree we should not cross. Rosh Hashanah is a time for us to individually and collectively think about who we are. What are *our* boundaries? What makes someone a loyal Jew? What makes someone a loyal American? The President and the Squad seem to think they know. I would like to suggest otherwise. In doing so, I want to reflect on how we think about our boundaries. How do we treat difference? What are the differences that we can accept and where do we draw the line?

When I was a sophomore in college our Hillel was planning a major event for the new millennium – S2K – Shabbat for 2000. I was on the planning committee and we were approached by the Orthodox rabbi who wanted to take charge of the program. Our Hillel director, himself a Reform rabbi, responded by saying: "That would be wonderful. Just remember that Hillel is a multi-denominational organization. We would be happy for you to take the lead in organizing, but you have to include our Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist

students as well.” The Orthodox rabbi looked at us and said: “No problem, but I have one red line.”

Just to fill everyone in, a red line in our tradition, known as *yehareg v’al ya’avor*, applies to three circumstances where if threatened with your life, you must choose death rather than commit a transgression. In all other cases, transgression is permitted as human life takes precedence. The three exceptions are: idolatry, adultery, and murder. So here, this Orthodox rabbi was giving us his red line. Now to the best of my knowledge, there wasn’t going to be major adultery at this Shabbat program. I don’t think idolatry was really on the table. I knew that my Reform and Reconstructionist colleagues weren’t going to be killing anyone. So I was prepared for a very special moment. I was about to hear a *fourth principle!* After 2000 years of Jewish law, we were going to hear an official articulation of the fourth red line. I was sitting at the edge of my seat! The Orthodox rabbi looked at us and said, “*mechitza*.”

Really?! *Mechitza*? The divider between men and women in an Orthodox synagogue? I have several friends who are Orthodox and pray with a *mechitza*. But there are 613 commandments and that division between men and women is somewhere in level of importance between 573 and 596. So this *mechitza* was *the* red line? I quickly realized that this rabbi was creating a boundary. The reason he chose *mechitza* is because that was the only thing that would make it impossible for the weekend to happen. If he would have said, “The food has to be kosher,” that would have been easy. The community was already trained that we should always make sure everyone can eat. God forbid if Jews can’t eat. It became very clear that the goal of this red line, the goal of this boundary, was not to create an inclusive community *despite* difference, but to define his community alone as insiders. Or, if you will, loyal Jews vs. disloyal Jews. That experience always stuck with me and informs how I look at boundaries within Judaism today and how I accept difference in general. This acceptance, I would argue, is actually a foundational principle that promotes social cohesion and enables our communal survival.

In order to understand this principle, I want to retell a famous Talmudic story. For three years, the students of Hillel and Shammai argued with each other. This one said: “The law follows me,” and this one said: “The law follows me.” To fully appreciate this story you have to realize that for *decades* the students of Hillel and Shammai argued over everything. For *decades* they tried to convince each other to no avail. What made these three years noteworthy? For three years they stopped offering arguments because there was nothing new to add to the discussion. For three years, all they said to each other was: “I’m right...I’m right...I’m right.” That was Jewish dialogue for three years. When human beings reach such an impasse in our tradition, we like it when God solves the problem. As they say, that which we can’t create in history we can at least create in our own imagination. After three years a voice came forth from heaven and said, “*eilu v’eilu divrei Elohim chayim* – these and these are the words of the Living God” (Eruvin 13b). In other words, God basically said: Enough! Both of you are wrong! Both of you are wrong because each of you assumes that you’re the only one who is right.

To be fair, not all difference causes angst or requires divine intervention. Some differences are easy to live with. We call it pluralism. Pluralism is for those differences which we believe to be of equal value to our own position. When I discuss religion with other clergy I think to myself: That’s not what I believe but there is no value distinction; there is no qualitative difference between us. Difference which falls under the category of pluralism is the easiest to

assimilate. The difficulty is that anyone who has an ideology, morals, or a principled commitment who is not a relativist by definition, will find the category of pluralism to be limited. It is very natural when you have core beliefs to say: Excuse me, I'm right and you're wrong. *These* and *these* are the words of the Living God, but not *those* and *those*. Some differences fall under the category of pluralism, but what about difference that we don't think is of equal value?

I would like to introduce two other essential categories. The first is tolerance. As the philosopher Bernard Williams once said, "Tolerance is for the intolerable." The paradox of tolerance is, why tolerate that which you think is wrong? There are a whole plethora of possibilities. Perhaps you think it's wrong but you're not certain it's wrong. Perhaps you recognize that even your certainties might change over time. Very often, from a political perspective, the foundation of tolerance has nothing to do with certainties or convictions. It often grows from the fact that I recognize that a certain society, community, or social group is simply *not mine*. Nobody died and left me the sole arbiter over who could determine the shared cultural space of this country. I allow for difference precisely because I recognize the society is yours as well. The last King of the Jews and arbiter of Jewish loyalty was Hoshea and his reign ended on Rosh Hashanah – roughly 2700 years ago. *This* society is made up of different individuals, each with inalienable rights, and one of those inalienable rights is the *right to be wrong*.

To be an American, to be a Jew, is to tolerate that which you think is wrong. If anybody thinks that's strange, recall what it was like to become an adolescent, or if you ever had the pleasure of an adolescent living in your home. All of the sudden, you have to share your house with a deviant. Just recently my son said to me for the first time: "Abba, get out of *my room!*" Initially, I didn't even understand what he was talking about. What do you mean "*your room?*" Then I began to realize that while we all live in the same house, we have different rooms. We act and believe differently in each of our spaces and that's ok. If you want *shalom bayit* – peace in your home, peace in our community, or peace in our country, you have to tolerate difference.

Before you jump out of your seat, there are, of course, some differences which are indeed intolerable. There is a line that I cannot cross. There are some things that you might have a right to do, but if you do so, you essentially belong somewhere else and you cease to be a loyal member of the community. Every society has the category of betrayal. I accept "These and these are the words of the Living God." I can tolerate "those and those," but "them" is another issue altogether.

If the last category was tolerance, the final category is intolerable deviance. The truth is we tolerate a lot. Take speeding for example. What's the speed limit on the Beltway (assuming it's the middle of the night and there's no construction) – 55. Driving 50 to 60, that's pluralism. 60 to 65 is tolerable. 70 to 75, if the police see you they will give you a ticket. But then something fascinating happens. What happens after you get a speeding ticket? You go on driving. Even though your actions were not tolerated, they were what I call tolerable deviance. We reject the behavior but you haven't become a dangerous driver, you're still a good citizen. What happens if you are driving 110 or you are driving under the influence? You are taken off the road. That's intolerable. It is the intolerable behaviors which cause societies to create a whole plethora of marginalization mechanisms – from jails to diminishing our loyalty. Once you cross

the line, whatever that line is, you are no longer a driver in good standing, or a loyal American, or a loyal Jew.

One of the great challenges facing the Jewish community and America is that the line between the tolerable and the intolerable is not always determined by the severity of the act but by the number of people who commit the act. Boundaries define who we are but cannot *redefine* who we are. You can argue with me and say: “I think *this* is what it means to be a loyal Jew.” Great. Knock yourself out. I hope God agrees with you. But let me be clear, I am not arguing that what Jews do constitutes what Judaism ought to be, I am arguing that what Jews do will in the end have an impact and sometimes even constitute what Judaism is. There’s a big difference. If everybody jumps off a cliff it doesn’t mean that you ought to, but it does mean that jumping off a cliff is now something that people do. Regardless of what *you* define as a loyal Jew or a loyal American, the minute a certain idea has a significant place in our society, it becomes part of who we are.

A classic example is the internal discourse in the Jewish community around intermarriage. In the Bible, intermarriage was allowed. Judaism was patrilineal, and as long as you were not part of the seven Canaanite nations a non-Jewish woman could marry a Jewish man and automatically become part of the Jewish community. By the rabbinic period, intermarriage became prohibited. For centuries and millennia the Jewish community saw intermarriage as one of the classic red lines. That was the boundary that you did not cross. And then Jewish history meets the United States. America becomes the first country in Jewish history where non-Jews *want* to marry Jews. Prior to America why would you want to marry a Jew? You want to check out a pogrom? Seriously. What would be your inclination? Oh yes, it’s like some extreme sport to see if my children can run away from a Cossack. It was considered an act of total insanity. No one would do such a thing. America becomes the community where Jews are welcomed in a way that we could never have imagined. Intermarriage is no longer a result of Jews being less committed. Parents don’t sit shiva for their child. They go to the wedding. They include Jewish rituals. The couple often raises Jewish children. Many join synagogues and become part of our family. Intermarriage in our own lifetime has shifted from *intolerable* deviance to, for many, pluralism. The Jewish community in America is simply an intermarried community. You may have your own feelings about this. Denominations may issue statements. You can call it whatever you want, but it is no longer a boundary issue. Remember, a boundary cannot be erected which *redefines* a community. Boundaries only serve to help the community understand itself.

So, who exactly *is* a disloyal Jew? Who has stepped over the red line? I offer two answers. In the rabbinic tradition, there were two things and two things only that made you an intolerable deviant. One: you are a *mishumad l’kol ha’Torah kullah* – you destroy any connection that you have to Jewish life. You could violate 612 commandments. If you kept one, you were not an intolerable deviant. The implication here is that as long as you have some connection, as long as you see yourself in any way still bound inside, you haven’t crossed the line. The second answer is: *poresh min hatzibur* – one who says the Jewish people are not my people. Recall the paradigm of the evil child in the Passover haggadah. The evil child is not the child who doesn’t listen, breaks curfew, and totals your car. The evil child is the one who said: What is this worship to *you*? To *you* and not to *me*. Since this individual has separated himself from the community he is a heretic in the essence. You’re not a heretic if you don’t believe in

God. Maimonides tried to make faith a boundary but it didn't catch. If you separate yourself from the community...then you are a heretic in the essence of Judaism.

I share this because we learn from our tradition the extreme care given before labeling someone as disloyal, before utilizing the category of intolerable deviance. Our society is profoundly flawed because we are trying to create a reality with only two categories: pluralism and intolerable deviance. These days we are only willing to live with difference if it is difference we value. If you don't go to my shul or belong to my denomination, you are an intolerable deviant. You vote for a particular political party, intolerable deviant – a disloyal Jew. You support and advocate on behalf of Israel, intolerable deviant – a disloyal American. I'm not going to tell anyone who they should and shouldn't vote for. But when someone thinks that the existence of my opinion is destroying our people or our country, *that* is when you have crossed the line. Our social structures and public discourse fail to recognize that the foundational principles of community are not pluralism and intolerable deviance. They are actually tolerance and tolerable deviance. That is where communities are in fact sustained. It is when I can live with the person who I know is *wrong...profoundly wrong*. Recall that for three years the students of Hillel and Shammai said: "You're wrong,"... "No, you're wrong." And guess what neither of them did. They didn't leave the room. That is the way you build community.

So now we have a challenge. Throughout history the Jewish community always knew how to get along when anti-Semitism existed. When there is a little anti-Semitism, as the argument goes, I may not like you, but since "they" don't distinguish between us, we shouldn't distinguish between us. While anti-Semitism still exists, we are blessed to live in a country where it is greatly diminished. These days, every group in America is hated to some degree. Now I recognize that this statement makes some Jews very angry. We are the only group where you can be called disloyal if you declare that we are not hated. Somehow we like it. How dare you...we are still hated! Baruch Hashem. Thank God. I don't want to get into a debate of how hated we are. Now it's true there is hatred in the world. We Jews have suffered profoundly, but that's not my reason for existence. We have to learn how to survive despite that hatred, not because of it. What is clear is that we are not being hated enough to overcome our differences. The same could be said of our moment in America. During WWI, WWII, after the attacks of 9/11, our nation came together. Without a common enemy, without a shared existential threat, we seem to unravel at the seams. Perhaps it is only appropriate that this week is the 76th anniversary of the Danish rescue of Jews. During a dark period in our history, Denmark represented a culture of accepting difference while refusing to tolerate anyone who didn't. Can we do the same?

We have to learn not to aspire for a community which agrees, but a community which discovers the art of disagreement. As Jews and as Americans, it is neither unpatriotic nor disloyal to voice dissent, regarding our government or the government of Israel. Perhaps most appropriate for this moment is that criticism and love are not opposites but two sides of the same coin. Whether it concerns our family, our country, or the State of Israel, to voice dissent from a place of love is arguably the most Jewish, most loyal, most Zionist, and most important thing an American Jew can do.

A measure of courage would serve us well today. If we are able to step back from the issues that divide us and concentrate on those areas of value that certainly exist in the other, if we

are able to see other Jews and fellow Americans in the broader context that is their Jewish and American life and cease to focus merely on that which we reject, we could begin the process of identifying our common foundations. While there is much that we renounce in the other, there is so much that we can appreciate. We must, however, make the decision to *look*. It is possible that this decision must be the first expression of our mutual presumption of loyalty – not a promise to try not to exclude, nor a promise to refrain from radical marginalization, but a loyalty which allows ourselves to dare to find features in the other which we respect. Today is Rosh Hashanah. On this day we imagine the Book of Life lying open before God. Friends, please God we will all have a place in God's book. Let us commit to ensuring that we also have a place in the books of each other. And when we do, the meaning of being a loyal Jew, the meaning of being a loyal American, and the power and vitality of our community will reach a completely different height.