Red and Blue Together

Rabbi Melanie Aron

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Many years ago, on the High Holy Days, Rabbi Lisa Levenberg gave a sermon about accepting differences. She told a story that I remember in this way.

Picture a young California family, mom and dad and a small child. Mom is pregnant but the child is worried. What if the new baby doesn't fit in with their family? What if the baby is . . . a Republican?

I hope you cracked a smile, but actually the issue of socialization across the political divide is a serious one, studied by various political scientists and demographers. Lynn Vavreck found that in 1958, 72% of Americans didn't care if their daughter married someone of the opposite party, but by 2016 that was down to 45% who didn't care, and over a quarter of both Democrats and Republicans cared a lot. This is also reflected in marriage statistics, where Eitan Hersch and Yair Ghitza found that while interracial and interreligious marriages are increasing, the percentage of interparty marriages in the United States is declining.

This statistic is important to me because of the way that Judaism has handled divisions within the community. Having different ideas, even about very important things, did not ultimately split the community, so long as members of the opposing factions kept marrying each other. Let me give three examples.

The first is a short passage from the Babylonian Talmud (Yabamot 14 a), which follows a long list of the ways that the followers of Hillel and the followers of Shammai differed, not just on theoretical questions, but on *halakhah* involving personal status.

Despite the fact that these *halakhot* entail important ramifications depending on whether or not these women were married or fit for marriage, or whether their offspring are fit for marriage, "Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying women from Beit Shammai. This serves to teach you that they practiced affection and camaraderie between them, to fulfill that which is stated in the Written Torah: 'Love truth and peace'" (Zechariah 8:19).

A similar situation prevailed for many centuries between the Karaites, a group that emerged in the eighth century and insisted that they would follow only Biblical and not Talmudic law, and the Rabbanites, who embraced the Talmud.

For many centuries, marriages between the two group were perfectly legal and commonly practiced. *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* notes that medieval Karaism was and saw itself as an integral part of Judaism, and such marriages did not entail any form of "conversion" of any of the parties. Seven marriage contracts involving Karaite and Rabbanite individuals have so far been discovered in the Cairo Genizah. These marriage contracts stipulated the mutual tolerance of those practices in which the Karaites and the Rabbanites differed. These specific stipulations concerned differences in dietary laws, restrictions on lighting the Sabbath candles, and the promise of Rabbanite

husbands not to make love to their Karaite wives during Sabbath and festivals—practices strictly forbidden by Karaite law. Due to the differences in calendar, Karaite and Rabbanite festivals did not coincide, and the marriage contracts always included a clause to guarantee that both parties would be allowed to observe their festivals on their respective dates.

Maimonides, the great medieval scholar, ruled against such marriages, but my sources seem to indicate that they continued anyway, all the way into the early modern period. We have records from the period of the Chmielnicki massacres in 1648 when Karaites and Rabbanites were considered one community and where in the centuries that followed, the lump tax imposed on the Jewish community in Lithuania and Poland included both Rabbanites and Karaites. The first evidence of a separation of communities occurs in the 18th century in Eastern Europe, when the Czar deemed the Karaites a separate community.

Finally, my third example is the division between Mizrachi and Ashkenazi Jews in the 20th century. At first in Israel, it was rather absolute, particularly in the early 1950s with the influx into Israel of almost 650,000 Jews from the Arab world. In the early days of the state, there was not a lot of intermarriage, but a study from the 1990s found that 28% of Israeli children at that time had one Ashkenazi and one Mizrachi parent. The level of that sort of intermarriage continues to rise, so much so that Orthodox rabbinic authorities have written extensively on appropriate kashrut observance, particularly around Passover, for mixed families.

Cleary it is not ideas or issues but *identity* that makes for a definitive break between communities.

That is what Dr. Mari Fitzduff, professor emerita of the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, and author of *Why Irrational Politics Appeals,* discussed in a Council on Foreign Relations program I heard recently on Social Justice and Reconciliation in the United States.

Fitzduff argues that reconciliation will be more about emotions than about issues. She believes that the support for Trump was less about issues, even taxation or abortion, though those were important to some, but more about feeling good and having a sense of belonging. An article in Scientific America, entitled "Trump's Appeal, What Psychology Tells Us," quotes an ethnographic study of the Trump rallies, describing them more as religious ritual than as political events. Every aspect of the experience—the long wait to get in, the very visible security, the recruitment of the audience to attack protestors, the segregation of the media as a visible enemy, and Trump's words themselves—was designed to build identity as the people united against an establishment that didn't care about them.

So where do we go from here?

I am encouraged, at least partially, by certain statistics. Eric Ward, an expert on extremism in the United States, believes that only a third of Trump voters have really embraced white nationalism. A recent Fox News poll found that 60% of Trump voters as of last week, before the Electoral College outcome was clear, said they would "work with Biden." There is an opportunity to build bridges—but how we go about it will matter a great deal. Policy discussions must follow human contact and not vice versa. Ward himself writes about the need for "intimacy" in relations between groups. Yet he and others remind us that listening is not

agreeing and that it would be tragic if our desire for national unity led to a repeat of the compromises made in the second half of the 19th century at the expense of the Black community.

I was at a meeting recently where we were asked to take out our phones and count the number of people of a different race who were on our speed dial or phone address book. Similarly, we might ask what kind of social contact we have with those of opposing views. There are many efforts right now to bring America together, ranging from the living room dialogues of Braver Angels to the bipartisan meeting groups of members of Congress. In our Torah portion, Joseph and his brothers will find reconciliation after real evidence of change has been demonstrated.

May we also be blessed to find a path to overcoming the present divide.