

A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Rheins,

Vive La Différence and Bless You Too!

On a recent posting on a blog for Reform Rabbis, a colleague wrote about defriending those who had differing political views. Apparently, this is not uncommon. As one who is not on Facebook, I am, admittedly, a bit wary of the whole friending-unfriending deal. It seems so cliquish. Yes, I'm aware that not all of one's Facebook "friends" are really friends. But in the current cultural mood of super-heated and divisive rhetoric, relationships are being destroyed. What used to be a friendly debate of politics and philosophy now quickly devolves into a "oh, you're one of them!" Where once we could speak knowingly and even sympathetically about politicians and social movements of various perspectives, we are now confined to searching for visual and verbal cues as to whether or not the person you are speaking with is on a quick trigger of indignation, a shock trooper of one ideology or another who is just waiting to explode in self-righteous anger. Yikes! Hey, let's just talk about the weather!

Of course, nothing is new under the sun. Human civilization regularly cycles through uncivil periods of deteriorating social discourse. This week's Torah portion, *Lekh Lekha*, begins with an acknowledgement that no matter who you are, there will be those who line up to curse you. This amazing beginning to the Abraham narrative starts with young Avram (not yet blessed as Abraham) urged to leave his troubled land and venture forth to create a new and better society:

Genesis 12:1 Adonai said to Avram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land which I will show you. ²I will make you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; ³ I will bless the one who bless you and I will curse the one who curses you.

The Torah exposes our human tendency to bless and curse one another. We find countless reasons and justifications for both. It may very well be in our human character to look with suspicion on others who are a bit different from us. Humans have been known to indulge in harsh judgment based on a person's race, religion, gender, height, weight, shape, voice, sexual preference, and, yes, political points of view. We've made a lot of progress over the past few generations in addressing and reducing bigotry, racism, homophobia and antisemitism. Those obnoxious manifestations of small-mindedness are still with us---but we are making significant progress. It goes without saying that we have taken an awful step backward when it comes to the disdain and disrespect expressed by otherwise nice and thoughtful people who have different political philosophies.

As Avram (Abraham) was about to embark on a noble and courageous journey to establish a monotheistic faith for his fellow Hebrews and all others who were interested, God swore an oath of protection: I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you."

The psychological and spiritual validity of God's oath has been demonstrated throughout history and in our own common experiences. Those bent on cursing and spreading hatred become consumed by their own anger. Those who devote themselves to blessing and uplifting others will, themselves, be elevated. This ethic applies regardless of how "different" or unusual another person is. The commandment remains the same: see the blessing in everyone.

Indeed, Jewish tradition has a specific blessing for when one meets an "unusual or different" person or animal:

Barukh Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, m'shaneh habriyot.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Creator of the Universe,
who makes creatures different.

We are taught to see the godly in all creation. We don't all look alike. We don't all think alike. We don't all have the same faith or perspective. Still, each person and every creature brings something different to enrich God's tapestry of life. *Vive La Différence* and Bless You Too!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

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