

Our Path Together

On my various rabbinic listservs, there has been some discussion, as you might imagine, about how and if we rabbis will be addressing the presidential election over the High Holydays. Due to the tax exempt status of our congregations, we are legally barred from telling people to do everything in their power to keep a misogynistic, racist, narcissistic proto-dictator from becoming our next president - so I will refrain from doing that. But we can certainly talk about the election in more general terms if we so choose.

But to be honest, I - like many of you I am sure - I am so exhausted and depressed by the entire spectacle, that I do not want to address it directly here with you. I trust everyone in this room, whatever your political inclinations, to make thoughtful choices and exercise the responsibility and the civic duty of voting on November 8, not just for president, but for important ballot initiatives and other elected offices.

What I would like to do is talk a little bit about our own "body politic," our Dorshei Tzedek community, our own aspirations and challenges in the coming year. Many years ago I read a beautiful teaching in Martin Buber's book, *Paths in Utopia*. In this book, written in the 1940s, Buber merged his study of Hasidism and his interest in what he called "authentic community" with a critique of the Marxism of his day, specifically the Stalinist Soviet Union. In reclaiming the need for a utopian socialist vision, Buber made a very interesting point: if we do not create, right here and now, the alternative communities that we would like to live in, then when and if the revolution comes--when and if systems of oppression are removed--we will simply go on to create new oppressive structures. This, he suggested, was exactly what had happened in the USSR. Buber emphasized the need not just for political and economic transformation, but for the personal transformation, the spiritual transformation, that must accompany those changes, in order for something truly new to emerge.

Whether or not you consider yourself a socialist, there is a lot of wisdom in Buber's insight. I like to think that what we are doing here, in our congregation, is a small yet important piece of this work of building a new world. While we attend to the injustices in the society around us, joining our efforts with others in campaigns for justice for farmworkers, affordable housing in Boston, criminal justice reform in Massachusetts, and more, we also are engaged in the holy work of creating covenantal community. We have created a financial structure for our congregation that recognizes the economic disparities of the surrounding society, and refuses to abide by its assumptions or values. We have explored what it means to be a community that takes the obligations of *hesed*, lovingkindness, seriously. We have sought to be a community grounded in values - beautifully illustrated on one of the banners outside in the lobby - values that connect us both to Jewish tradition and to our highest aspirations.

Over the past few years, some different initiatives undertaken by different people in the congregation have lifted up some new avenues for exploration, areas that the Board will be thinking about and helping the congregation think about in the coming year. What all of these initiatives have in common is that they speak to the ways in which our community is already diverse, or ways in which we seek to deepen and broaden our diversity.

At a Board meeting last spring, there was a discussion of the economic diversity that we have achieved as a congregation over the past 20 years. One wonderful result of our dues system, which makes membership accessible to anyone at any income level, is that Dorshei Tzedek is fairly income diverse. Based on information gleaned from an income-based dues structure, we know that our community includes people of all income levels, from low-income to rich. We also know, anecdotally, about the challenges this kind of diversity can bring. There are sometimes resentments at all points along the income spectrum, and assumptions and projections that people make about one another.

We live in a society of extreme income inequality, a society where it is uncommon to socialize across divides of income and class. Within that context, we have made a conscious choice to be a community in which some people have limited income and need to be extremely careful with any expenditure, while others can make lifestyle choices completely out of the realm of possibility for others. There is nothing inherently wrong with anyone's choices, but we bring with us the assumptions and judgments of the society of which we are a part. Our challenge and our opportunity is to embrace all of this complexity and not run away from it.

Another hallmark of American society is the taboo on speaking about economic diversity and class differences. Jewish tradition, by contrast, sanctifies all aspects of our lives by talking about it. This is why we called our process of creating our dues structure the "Torah of Money." We wanted to affirm that talking about money and related issues is indeed a kind of Torah. The next step in our Torah of money might be honest conversation about income diversity, about being part of a community where our economic opportunities and choices are not equal, are not all the same, and yet where we can remain in relationship with one another across those differences, without anyone needing to feel shame or guilt.

This theme of coming together across our differences has also emerged in another area of inquiry. This past year we were chosen to be a partner congregation of the Ruderman Synagogue Inclusion Project, which supports synagogues in becoming places where people of all abilities are valued equally and participate fully. With the support of the Ruderman Foundation and Combined Jewish Philanthropies, as well as the support of the Gateways program, we have been able to hire an Inclusion Coordinator for our school--our own, very wonderful Alison Lobron. We are doing our best to provide a Jewish education for as many of our kids as possible, to build a community among our kids where every child can be celebrated and can learn. We will also be exploring ways to make all of our programming more accessible, and to understand better the obstacles to participation that exist that we might not even be aware of.

If money--either having it or not having it--can be taken in our larger society as a marker of personal worth, as something to feel shame or guilt about--then how much more so mental or physical disability. It is a powerful aspiration for us to try to create something different. What would it mean to be a community that truly celebrates all types of human ability and uniqueness? What are the different kinds of Torah that we have to learn from one another, from the different perspectives that we and our children bring? How might we learn patience, and compassion, and curiosity, and playfulness, and new ways of seeing, by embracing our many different abilities? As with the next steps in our Torah of money, I look forward to this exploration of who we are--and who we can become--as a community.

The area we have just begun to explore is the realm of racial and ethnic diversity. This past June, Rabbi Shahar and a group of CDT congregants, many from our Understanding Race group, attended a training facilitated by the Reform movement as part of their Audacious Hospitality initiative. The program was about racial diversity within the Jewish community, and how congregations can become actively multicultural and anti-racist. This is a question that is very alive in the wider American Jewish community, as the awareness grows that the white supremacy that infects our larger American society has had deeply negative effects within the Jewish community. Jews of color have known this for a long time, but there is now a growing understanding among white Jews, and within our communal institutions.

Here at Dorshei Tzedek, I am hopeful that we can learn and grow together as we come to understand that racism isn't just something that happens "out there," in the wider world, but has effects inside our own community. I am hopeful that we can be part of a growing movement to celebrate the diversity that already exists within the American Jewish community--diversity of skin color, of Jewish heritage, of the many different cultural traditions that exist within Judaism.

As a Reconstructionist rabbi, I was trained to understand that "Judaism" is not one monolithic thing, that Judaism is as varied as the diverse Jewish communities that have existed in every part of the world over the past two thousand years. To really celebrate that reality, and to affirm the new kinds of diversity that we are creating in 21st century American Judaism, is a wonderful challenge and invitation.

Economic diversity, diversity of ability, racial and cultural diversity--this is some of what we will be exploring together this year. But those are not the only ways in which I hope we can be a community that celebrates all of who we are. I hope we can be a home for folks of all gender identities, a truly trans-friendly community. I hope that we can be a Jewish community where men will understand that you are wanted and needed, where we can reverse the trend occurring throughout the non-Orthodox Jewish world, where men's participation is rapidly declining. I hope that all of our members who are not Jewish yet have chosen to be part of a Jewish community will feel deeply valued and appreciated. I hope that we will figure out how to be in relationship with one another across our very real differences when it comes to Israel and Palestine, modeling for the rest of the American Jewish community what it means to truly engage in debate for the sake of heaven on perhaps the most pressing issue facing the Jewish people.

I don't think it is easy to have these ambitions. To make real change in a community, to embrace very real differences, means to accept a certain level of discomfort as the norm. To realize I have been excluding or hurting others, even if unintentionally, is uncomfortable. To really be open to a community that looks and acts differently than what I am used to, is uncomfortable.

There are very strong messages in our culture that discomfort is something bad, something to be avoided. The definition of privilege is the ability to avoid discomfort. To have privilege means that the world is arranged in such a way that I can glide through life thinking that the way things are is the way that they are meant to be. To imagine a different kind of world means letting go of the assumptions of privilege, and letting go of the illusion of comfort that accompanies those assumptions.

This is why we can see this aspiration of true diversity and inclusivity as a spiritual task. To be able to sit with discomfort, to embrace it and learn from it, is a spiritual practice. Real spiritual practice is not about achieving a state of bliss. It is agitational, with the understanding that that agitation serves a higher good. Yom Kippur is agitational. It asks us to look at ourselves and not be satisfied. It asks us to acknowledge that we have engaged, individually and collectively, in sins of both omission and commission. Sometimes we transgress not because of what we have done, but because of what we have failed to do.

Yom Kippur asks us to see this work of transformation as a collective task. We began this evening by invoking the power of the *yeshivah shel ma'alah* and the *yeshivah shel matah* - those who congregate "above" and those who congregate "below." That is, all of us. We asked permission of HaMakom, the Godliness that dwells within all of Creation, and of the *kahal*, of this community. We gave one another permission to pray with the *avaryanim*. Who are they? What exactly are "*avaryanim*"? Some say it means--those who have transgressed. That is, all of us. Some say it means--"Iberians," meaning Conversos, hidden Jews, those who have some aspect of their identity that cannot yet be fully acknowledged and celebrated. That is, all of us.

This opening recitation is an invitation to create a community in which all can be recognized, all embraced, all included. A community into which we can each bring all the parts of ourselves, whether loved or unloved. And to become that community, we need to forgive ourselves, and forgive one another, for the mistakes we have made, and the mistakes we will invariably make. If we fear making those mistakes, we will never change. So we begin by granting forgiveness, and then move on from there.

In a moment we will take time for the silent Amidah, our first opportunity this Yom Kippur to take some private time for prayer, for reflection, for the work of contrition and forgiveness. I brought this evening an Al Chet written by Yavilah McCoy, a member of Shaarei Tefilla in Newton who works on issues of racial diversity in the Jewish community. I invite you to add her words to the traditional Al Chet that is part of this Amidah. And I invite you to add any other words that you are moved to add to your consideration of the sins we need to name, individually and collectively, on our path to transformation. And we have a few more silent Amidahs in the day to come, so it's okay if they do not all get spoken this evening.

It is traditional, as the Al Chet, the confessional, is recited, that we tap our chest, in the area of our heart, for each transgression that we name. We can understand this gesture in a number of ways. My colleague Jeremy Schwartz says that this tapping of the chest "can be understood as an outward sign and reminder of the inward pain" that comes from realizing the harm I have done, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Or we can think of the tapping as a kind of wake

up call, asking our hearts to open to the suffering within us and around us. Some people choose to lay an open hand over their heart, instead of a fist, in a healing gesture, inviting the heart to open in compassion for self and others.

Rabbi David Teutsch writes, in our machzor: "Saying we have done wrong is not only an acknowledgment of failure. It also contains the recognition that we know what is right. Living in a community concerned with doing good, being good, and trying to do better, we each internalize a moral compass that can guide us if we are prepared to listen for its still, small voice...In addressing [God, the Source of Compassion], we honor and validate our moral compass. We have done wrong. We are prepared to be directed by our compass toward atonement." (p. 794)

As we connect to our own internal moral compass, my hope is that in this new year we can serve as one another's moral compass, collectively charting a course of love and justice. Sometimes the world through which we navigate seems to throw up every possible obstacle. We need a lot of faith--in ourselves, in one another, in the Godly possibility all around us--to make it through those obstacles. May we help one another find the way, and stay the course, and be there for one another when we get a little lost or confused. May we, in the new year, find the way together.

Tzom kal, an easy fast, and may we all be sealed for good in the year to come.

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