

## Children of ONE God, Loving ONE another

A rabbi once asked his students, "How do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?"

The students thought they grasped the importance of the question. There are, after all, prayers that can be recited and rites and rituals that can be performed, only at night. And there are prayers and rites and rituals that belong only to the day. It is therefore important to know when night has ended and the day has begun. It is important to get the prayers and rites and rituals correct.

The brightest of the students offered an answer: "Rabbi, when I look out at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A second student offered his answer: "Rabbi, when I look from the fields and I see a house and I can tell that it's my house and not the house of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A third student offered an answer: "Rabbi, when I see an animal in the distance and I can tell what kind of animal it is, whether a cow or a horse or a sheep, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A fourth student offered yet another answer: "Rabbi, when I see a flower and I can make out the colors of the flower, whether they are red or yellow or blue, that's when night has ended and day has begun."

Each answer brought a sadder, more severe frown to the rabbi's face- until finally he shouted. "No! Not one of you understands!"

"You only divide! You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from your neighbor's field; you distinguish one kind of animal from another; you separate one color from the others. Is that all we can do- divide, separate, split the world into pieces? Isn't the world broken enough? Isn't the world split into enough fragments? Is that what Torah is for? No, my dear students, it's not that way, not that way at all!"

The shocked students looked into the sad face of their rabbi. One of them ventured, "The Rabbi, tell us: How do we know the night has ended and the day has begun?"

The rabbi stared back into the faces of his students, and with a voice suddenly gentle and imploring, he responded: **"When you look into the**

**face of the person who is beside you and you can see that the person is your brother or your sister, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun** (Feinstein, Capturing The Moon)."

The message of this story is simple enough to understand- the world is not defined by separations and differences, but by recognition of humanity.

It is worth noting that the original context of this story is a Mishnah concerning the appropriate time to recite the morning Shema- reminding us that we have no right to proclaim that God is One, if we are not prepared to recognize *all* of God's creatures as deriving from one common God.

Unfortunately, these days it seems as if this idea, this message is lost. We are constantly dividing. We are constantly decrying the other as somehow "less than" in our eyes. We (and I include myself in this) sometimes use social media as an "echo chamber" to shout our opinions to the world, and show the "other" side why they are wrong. We divide ourselves into groups with absolutely no nuance, often striving to turn issues that are very gray into issues that are black and white.

*You are a naive liberal radical or you are a crazy right wing fanatic. You care about "black lives matter," or you are racist. You care about "blue lives" or you have no respect for authority. You are pro-choice or you are a religious fundamentalist. You are pro-life or you are killing innocent lives. You are in favor of banning all guns or you are in favor of arming all of America. You*

*are with me, or you are other. And if you are "other," and you are not with me, you are wrong because your beliefs are different than mine!*

Does any of this sound familiar to you? What has happened to us as a society? How is it that we have allowed our anxieties and our fears to lead us to such angry, dark, hateful, and divisive places? When did fear and anxiety win and love, respect, and mutual understanding take a back seat?

How exactly have many in our society moved away from instinctively playing nicely with other kids on the playground - instead choosing to only share the sandbox with those kids who play the games we like, or bring us the toys we want, or are exactly like us?

I have four children age ten and under, and I have spent countless hours over the past decade in playgrounds. And of course, I have time and time again noticed what most parents might notice when observing their kids at play: unless they are somehow told by their parents to not play with "certain kids" (which, believe it or not in the year 2016, I have seen happen), kids have *no problem* playing together with other kids. Regardless of race, ethnicity, difference. Regardless of whether the kids have come with a mom, a dad, two moms, or two dads. Regardless of what the kids are wearing or what they look like. Somehow kids are able to see the other human beings

on the playground as simply kids who are equal to them in every way and who, when engaged, can enrich their experience on the playground.

When does this stop happening? At what age do we forget that those who are sharing the playground of life with us each and every day are to be loved, honored, and respected, not in spite of, but *because of* their sacred otherness and uniqueness.

Before I continue, let me be clear. There are times where the beliefs, words, and practices of "others" are wrong. It does not mean that this individual is less sacred in God's eyes, but the Torah is clear about right and wrong, about unethical, immoral, and unjust actions and perspectives. Racism is wrong. Homophobia is wrong. Misogyny and sexism are wrong. This is clear because ours is a tradition which celebrates diversity and seeks to honor those whose beliefs, practices, and viewpoints are different from ours; and it is also a tradition that insists that we continually strive to sanctify, bless, and build up- not profane, curse, or tear down.

But how do we know all of this? And aren't we "the chosen people," and doesn't that imply that others *are* somehow "*less than*" in God's eyes? In a word- no. That is simply a misread of chosenness and a misread of the tradition.

But don't take my word for it. Instead, let's take a closer look at the lessons that we are to learn from *Avraham Avinu*, the collective father of 2.4 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims and 13 million Jews- who is the main character of our Rosh Hashana Torah readings. In his incredible book called *Not in God's Name*, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks looks at numerous texts from the book of Genesis in order to explain how the religious fundamentalists in this world, those who divide the world into the "righteous," and the "other," have completely misread many of our shared ancient narratives. Sacks offers us a language for how we might remember that our shared ancient texts are not about choosing one "side" over the other, but rather about reminding us that all of God's creatures, in all of their diversity, are loved and cared for by God. For example, we can take a closer look at the narrative that we read this morning concerning Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael. Sacks writes:

None of this is as we would expect. Ostensibly, the hero of the story is Isaac. He is the chosen. But our sympathies are not drawn to Isaac, nor in these episodes at least, to Sarah. Isaac has been singled out to carry the covenantal destiny. God has said so repeatedly. But we are left in no doubt that Abraham is attached to Ishmael, that our sympathies are drawn to him and Hagar, that Ishmael will be blessed, that God hears his tears and is 'with him' as he grows up.

Why was Ishmael not chosen? It is because, like Esau in the next generation, he has physical strength and cunning.... Intimated here is one of the most striking themes in the Pentateuch. *God chooses those who cannot do naturally what others take for granted.* Abraham, Isaac

and Jacob, all promised the land of Canaan/Israel, own none of it and have to beg or pay to bury their dead... Moses, bearer of the divine word, is the man who says, 'I am not a man of words..I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue. Israel is the people whose achievements are transparently God-given....It is Ishmael's natural strength that disqualifies him.

*Yet Ishmael is not vilified.* That is the masterstroke of the narrative. Despite the fact that Abraham, Sarah and Isaac are the heroes of the story as a whole, in the two crucial scenes in the desert our imaginative sympathies are with Hagar and her child....we feel for Sarah and Isaac, *but we also feel for Hagar and Ishmael.* We enter their world, see through their eyes, empathize with their emotions. That is how the narrative is written, to enlist our sympathy. We weep with them, feeling their outcast state. As does God. For it is he who hears their tears, comforts them, saves them from death, and gives them his blessing. Ishmael means 'he whom God has heard.' (115,117-118)

There is an incredible midrash on the fifth aliyah of our reading this morning which tells us that, years after this incident, Abraham drops in for a surprise visit to Ishmael's family "in the wilderness of Paran." Abraham wanted to see whether or not Ishmael's wife, who he had never met, who came from a different people and place, would show kindness to him -- a complete stranger. This is the same type of test that Abraham's servant chooses when he goes to find a bride for Isaac and we are reminded by Rabbi Sacks of its significance:

At the core of the Bible's value system is that cultures, like individuals, are judged by their willingness to extend care *beyond* the boundary of family, tribe, ethnicity, and nation (123).

On the surface, the story of Isaac and Ishmael is about sibling rivalry and the displacement of the elder by the younger. Beneath the surface, however, the sages heard a counter-narrative telling the

opposite story: the birth of Isaac does not displace Ishmael. To be sure, he will have a different destiny. But he too is a beloved son of Abraham, blessed by his father and by God.... (123)

What an insightful message for the times in which we are living. Sacks goes on to argue throughout the book that those who read these biblical narratives as purely about issues of displacement, or favoritism towards members of the covenant alone have missed the point of the Bible entirely. He reminds us that though Abraham lived differently from his neighbors, he fought for them and prayed for them in some of the most audacious language ever uttered by a human to God. In the narrative about Sodom and Gemorah, Abraham argued against destroying the cities and exclaimed to God: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" (Gen 18:25). He sought to be true to *his faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith* (4).

This is more than just a lesson in religious "tolerance." This is a reminder that:

something transcends our differences. That something is God, and he has set his image on each of us. That is why every life is sacred and each life is like a universe. The unity of God asks us to respect the stranger, the outsider, the alien, because even though he or she is not in our image- their ethnicity, faith, culture is not ours-nonetheless, they are in God's image (194-195).

Have you ever wondered why the Torah begins with a universal story; with the creation of the world, with Adam and Eve, with Noah and the flood and

not with the story of the Israelites journey from slavery to freedom?

According to Rabbi Sacks it is because there are actually two covenants in the Hebrew Bible and not only one. There is one that honors our common humanity, the other that sanctifies diversity and the particularity of love.

*And the universal comes first....* (200)

Sacks continues:

We are not all the same. There is an Us and a Them. But God is universal as well as particular, which means that he can be found among Them as well as among Us. God transcends our particularities. For though God is our God, he is also the God of all, accessible to all: the God who blesses Ishmael, who tells the children of Jacob not to hate the descendents of Esau, who listens to the prayers of strangers and whose messengers appear as strangers (204).

But all of this is not enough. Recognizing that the "other" is also one of God's creations, recognizing that God celebrates and honors individuals who value people of various beliefs, practices, and backgrounds is not the main point. The Torah pushes us even further, reminding us that we are to *love* the stranger (*v'ahavtah lo*), and not merely co-exist with him or her. It is not simply enough to "tolerate," we are taught- but rather we must "celebrate" the other- something that can often seem much harder to do. So how do we go about doing this? How do we move from intolerance, to tolerance, to love? The answer lies, again, with our father Abraham. When God tells Abraham to go forth from his native land and journey towards the land of Canaan, God promises Abraham that he will be blessed, but reminds



him that in order to be truly blessed- he must *serve as a blessing* towards others (וְאַבְרָכָה וְאַגְדֵּלָה שְׂמֵךְ וְהִיָּה בְרָכָה).

In a book all about blessings and life's wisdom, Dr. Naomi Remen reminds us that:

a blessing is about our relationship to the spark of God in one another. God may not need our attention as badly as the person next to us on the bus or behind us on line in the supermarket. Everyone in the world matters, and so do their blessings. When we bless others, we offer them refuge from an indifferent world...

A blessing is not something that one person gives another. A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth and strengthen what is whole in one another. By making a place for wholeness within our relationships, we enable people to remember who they are.

Blessing life moves us closer to each other and closer to our authentic selves. When people are blessed they discover that their lives matter, that there is something in them worthy of blessing. And when you bless others, you may discover this same thing is true about yourself. (My Grandfather's Blessings, 6-7)

Instead of eviscerating, or even merely tolerating one another- we must learn how to be a blessing towards one another in this world. We must act with kindness, with compassion, and with generosity. We must remember that just as we spend these days asking God to be compassionate, forgiving, and loving, so too must we, who are made in God's image, strive to do the same with all of God's creatures.

This then is our task. This then is our challenge: to become a blessing to others; to fill the world with compassion and understanding; to stand up to bigotry, intolerance, divisiveness, and this idolatrous, blasphemous behavior that is all too common in our world. Life was never meant to be a zero sum game. Abraham was loved by God. Ishmael was loved by God. In the end, we must remember that the "stranger," no matter how foreign to us, is not a stranger, and the "other" is not really all that other. They too are parents, spouses, siblings, and children. They, like us, are made in the image of the *Ribono shel ha olam*, the God of all of the universe. On this Rosh Hashanah, as we celebrate the rebirth of the world, as we celebrate a chance at renewal, let us remember the story of Abraham and Sarah, Ishmael and Hagar. Let us remember the mitzvah to love, and bring blessing to the "other." And let us celebrate this birthday of the world by giving God and one another the best birthday present possible -- love, tolerance, honor, and blessing for all of God's creatures. The wisdom of our tradition expects nothing less.

*Shanah Tovah U'metukah*- May this be a good and sweet new year for all of us.