

A few weeks ago I found myself having a conversation with my sister in which she expressed frustration at our generational compatriots - millennials - because of their disdain for her faith in God. She explained that this attitude on the East Coast is bad but that the West Coast may be worse. "At least in the South I'm just the wrong religion" she complained. As members of an interfaith family, belief in God has always been a part of the conversation while how one believes and how one practices is an individual choice.

I share this story because I started thinking deeply about why Judaism spoke to me as a child and why it still speaks loudly to me today. Many know that I am a liberal in my social politics, I may have grown up in Conservative Texas but I was lucky to have family who lived and breathed politics and religion and I was taught by my involvement in NFTY, the Reform Jewish youth movement, that all people are created *b'tzelem Elohim* - in the image of God.

As a high school student, I learned that this simple phrase from Genesis provides the basis for our Reform Jewish mandate that people of all colors, religions, abilities, sexualities, and the like each has a right to a seat at the table of community. In Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 we find the source for this understanding of those words, *b'tzelem Elohim*. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin shares it in his book *Jewish Literacy* as follows:

"One of the most eloquent Jewish statements about the value of human life comes from a very odd source: the admonition administered by ancient Jewish courts to witnesses testifying in capital cases. In addition to the expected warnings against perjury, the judges offered a

commentary on why God originally populated the world with only one person, Adam. “To teach you,” the witnesses were warned, “that whoever destroys one life it is considered by the Torah as if he destroyed an entire world, and whoever saves one life is considered by the Torah as if he saved an entire world.”

This is the explanation of the text that was taught to my NFTY cohort. It was so important in my personal understanding of Judaism that for a long time I had it as a favorite quote on my Facebook profile. This is the understanding of our tradition that leads to Reform Judaism’s conclusion that we must stand up for those who are being persecuted - whether they are marching in the streets of St. Louis or in the halls of Washington, D.C.

A few years have passed since my NFTY experience and during my time of study here at HUC-JIR, I have had the opportunity to learn numerous Jewish interpretations of texts. This includes the Jewish tradition that there can be a variety of perspectives on even that one phrase in Genesis. I learned that there is another rabbinic reading on that verse. Telushkin also shares it in his book as follows:

“In many editions of the Mishna, the rabbinic admonition has been altered to read: “Whoever destroys one Jewish life is considered by the Torah as if he had destroyed an entire world, and whoever saves one Jewish life is considered by the Torah as if he had saved an entire world.” Telushkin then states his opposition to textual change saying: “This change makes no sense since the proof of the infinite value of human life comes from Adam, and Adam was not a Jew.”

Yet even though many, including Rabbi Telushkin, may disagree, we still have an alternate reading of this text in which the command to embrace the universal is changed to one of Jewish exclusivity. In fact, much of *Halacha*, Jewish law, struggles with how we as a community should interact with those who are different than us, those who do not agree with the official norms and leadership. While I disagree and can argue against this version of my favorite text, its inclusion in our tradition actually leads us to a most necessary challenge: how do we interact with those with whom we disagree? Are we required to welcome them to our community table? Are there times when we simply must set a clear boundary?

In August, HUC-JIR Professor Michael Cook taught a class on Neutralizing Missionary Encroachment. Much of our time was spent discussing and understanding the texts used by Jews for Jesus and Messianic Jews to prove their understanding that Jesus is the Jewish messiah. Professor Cook explained that in many places members of these communities are approached by Church groups to speak to them about Passover and how problematic this can be. For, it is not the Jewish perspective on Passover that members of the Church are getting but rather the Jews for Jesus or Messianic Jew's approach to the Passover. According to their religious belief they believe themselves to be Jews but to our Jewish community, they are not Jews. I have learned about the threat that this can pose to our community. We Jews have the right to define the boundaries of our tradition and define the ways that others may join us at our table.

The deliberation about who should be included at the table of our community can be difficult and challenging. In a 1991 Founder's Day address, Dr. Michael Meyer taught of the necessity of drawing a line in the sand that establishes boundaries between countries. In relation to the boundaries of Reform Judaism itself he wrote his own perspective:

"We are a movement in which some of us take Halakha seriously, but we are not halakhic Jews; Reform Judaism is not Halakhic Judaism. It would seem strange if a congregation whose collective life was determined by the orthodox *psikah* [the legal ruling,] of its rabbi were to apply for admission to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Such a congregation certainly has its place within Judaism, as does a congregation whose liturgy does not mention God, but, to my mind at least, it lies beyond the furthest boundary of Reform Judaism, in that territory where religious conscience must submit to external religious authority."

There were many opinions and perspectives on his words which still found space, still found a home, within the tent which is the Reform movement.

Every movement, even our Reform movement which preaches audacious hospitality must have boundaries. In fact, we may change those boundaries from one generation to the next and we may redefine them as our understanding of the world changes. But even as we seek to be welcoming and to have as wide a tent as possible, it is clear as Dr. Meyer has written, that there must ultimately be a boundary, an end to the canopy's reach.

In every place, and on every issue, there will be those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree. There is no person who can be fully defined by one issue or one category when it comes to identity. The struggle to find space amongst identities that seem dichotomous was demonstrated by this year's Chicago Gay Pride Parade. As you may remember, some individuals were carrying rainbow Israeli flags and were ejected from the parade because another group saw this as unacceptable. That group refused to believe that the other could be both supportive of Gay Rights and supportive of Israel. They asserted the perspective that Israelis were committing human rights violations in the West Bank. Therefore gays, another persecuted group, could only stand with the Palestinians and not the Israelis, so many of whom are members of the LGBTQ community or allies of this community. This is a common thread in politically left spaces in our country and causes pain for many. However, we can recognize these moments as opportunities to educate, to reach out, to dialogue with those in disagreement with us. We can recognize that we do not need to agree on everything in order to be allies on some things. One's position on Gay Rights in the United States does not need to be aligned with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We can disagree on one and be united in another. At such times, we remember the first explanation of our text and focus on the ways that the other is made in the image of God. We can see the ways that boundaries become painful limitations and then recognize the need to reach out.

We can learn to carefully and thoughtfully assess the times when we set the boundaries. We remember that our prevailing tradition is to see each individual as worthy and equal. But including those with whom we disagree is certainly not simple. There is a wide diversity of

voices that one finds at an AIPAC Policy Conference. Not only political differences, both Republican and Democrat but religious differences and age differences as well. From high school students to retired ministers to current members of Congress to rabbis of almost every denomination, AIPAC draws a diverse crowd during their annual Policy Conference in Washington D.C.. In the past few years the Conference has grown so large that the main stage has moved from the Conference Center to the basketball arena. I can state, unequivocally, that people who would never speak to one another in any other context find themselves in dialogue, and in conversation, with one another during the Policy Conference. An understanding has arisen that it is critically important to reach out to others on a topic that we can agree on, even if it is only a singular issue. It was at AIPAC that I found myself in dialogue with Orthodox rabbinic students as well as listening to a panel session of Evangelical Christians who actively support Israel. I may have nothing else in common with some of the AIPAC participants but the fact that we are all at AIPAC allows us to recognize one another as someone with whom we can speak.

So how do we make this happen outside of a forum like AIPAC? Where else have we achieved this ability to live successfully in community with those with whom we disagree? Certainly in our synagogues and in our community, we Reform Jews are not a monolithic movement. We span the political spectrum, from Right to Left, and yet one of the most important Reform institutions is the RAC - the Religious Action Center. Every congregation provides financial support to the RAC, as part of their URJ - Union for Reform Judaism commitment. Congregations that want to be affiliated with the URJ do not have a choice to opt out of funding

the RAC. Yet on a number of different, and controversial issues, including on gun control legislation, the RAC holds a single position and it lobbies Congress on that position on behalf of our entire movement. Gun control is only one of many hot button issues on which many of our communities, many of our fellow congregants, disagree with the official RAC, and thus URJ, position. Yet, somehow, we remain in community with one another. As difficult as it is, we choose to focus on the ways that we feel affirmed and inspired because we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*. We choose to find our shared humanity in order to be part of the Reform Jewish community.

When I return to the rabbinic teaching that has been the inspiration for my commitment to Judaism, I realize that there may be a lesson in that second, less well known and less comfortable version of the midrash. We may not always agree and we may even have views that lead us to fight for different outcomes. There are times when it is clear that we must set boundaries. We cannot always provide a seat for everyone at the table. However, the decision to limit our sense of community and to work from within the limited understanding of the midrash should only be made after careful study of our text, tradition and our people.

Yet when we look at what we can do at AIPAC as well as in our Reform movement, then surely we can take our Jewish values and apply them to other aspects of our life. From the schools that our children attend to the companies at which we work and the cities in which we live, we have a responsibility to live out our belief that all people are made in the image of God. We are

required to see the other, wherever we may meet, as a human being, one who deserves our respect.

I attended college in Alabama and found more than one opportunity to develop true friendships with people who hold very different views than myself. Whether it was the student from Jordan who lived down the hall and became one of my closest friends because we knew not to discuss the Middle East. Or my classmate who had political dreams and asked if he was elected to State government if I, as a rabbi, would give the benediction at his swearing in. I told him yes I would though I would not vote for him. These relationships were possible because both parties saw beyond the division to the commonalities we held, whether it was our involvement in the LGBTQ group or our common studies in the field of history.

Together, as members of a community, whether we are Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox, whether we are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Athiest, we can choose to change the narrative from one of exclusion to one of inclusion. We must reach out to those with whom we have been taught we disagree. As Reform Jews we are required to live out our value, our belief, that we are all made *b'tzelem Elohim*, that we are all made in the image of God. May we all be blessed in our knowledge of our tradition and may we all go out and make positive change in our world.