

Over a lovely Shabbat lunch a few weeks ago, congregants and I were discussing the pleasures of a good summer read. Well, while I was on sabbatical this summer, busy studying with Rabbi Steve Sager, taking part in a silent meditation retreat and travelling with family, the irony is I didn't have much down time for leisure reading. In fact, with two young children, pleasure reading still seems a far way off in the future. But I did spend the summer delving into our sacred texts; and as this morning's Torah reading shows, few novels can compete with the narrative of Torah for power and human drama.

We read this morning of Sarah's expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. Let's listen to it again:

Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵ When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, ¹⁶ and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.

¹⁷ God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is." ¹⁸

In the past when I have read this Torah portion I would have to compose myself – to fight tears when I read these verses.

The radical, the amazing thing, is that the Torah is written so that we identify with the suffering of Hagar and Ishmael – not with the biblical heroes, our ancestors, Sarah and Abraham. We feel Hagar's suffering, and we fear for the child Ishmael.

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of England, said of this passage a few years ago as Duke's Kenan Ethics Institute Distinguished Lecturer, "There is no way to read it without having sympathy... We identify not with the chosen but with the rejected..."

Sacks goes on to wonder why Genesis is made up of narratives, rather than discussions of principle or ethics – why, in other words, Jews chose story as a way of expressing truth, rather than using debate or discourse as in Greek philosophy. And then he answers that Torah undertakes an immense task (and here I'll paraphrase):

To help us see the world through someone else's eyes – to see reality through the eyes of Ishmael and Hagar... and then to realize that they are human, too ... that they too are blessed by God, and when they cry, God hears. It is only when we can enter the mind of the other that we can save ourselves from inhumanity.

The recognition of the value and the experience of the other is the bedrock of a Jewish moral view.

This morning I want to explore with you Judaism's approach to the other – to those who do not share our faith tradition. To look at why our Jewish values in this regard are crucial for anchoring us amid the storms of discord of our time. And I want to speak in concrete terms about what our role here at the Kehillah can and must be in coming to understand, respect and honor the experiences of those who are not of our tradition.

In the First Edition of his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Sacks quotes Isaiah Berlin:

One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altar of the great historical ideals. It is the belief that those who do not share my faith – or my race, or my ideology – do not share my humanity.

The Torah begins, Rabbi Sacks notes, with the story of Cain and Abel. Two brothers, different offerings to God – and one brother kills the other. Why, he asks, does religious life that has the capacity to lead us to redemption also have the capacity to lead us to violence?

To begin to answer this troubling question Rabbi Sacks lays out two ideas, two ways of understanding the nature of human society: that of tribalism and that of universalism.

Religious expression can easily be seen as rooted in tribal tendencies. A sense of “us” inevitably leads to a sense of “them.” Any group of shared values or experiences can only exist if there is both a sense of membership, and by nature, of non-membership. Tribalism means having a group identity that excludes others – indeed that *creates* the sense of “other.” We are social animals; since the first human beings we have needed each other to survive. A sense of belonging – and thus a sense of exclusion – were part of survival. Tribalism, though, can also lead to an us/them approach and to violence against “them,” in order to ensure a group’s survival or interests.

So we recognize that tribalism – or particularism – can be very dangerous. Its opposite, and seeming antidote, would be universalism – an emphasis on the qualities that we share with others. Sacks defines universalistic cultures as those that see as the basis for our humanity the fact that we are ultimately all the same: we feel hunger, thirst, pain, despair. We are vulnerable. We reason, hope, dream, aspire. From a universalistic perspective, Sacks says, “What is true for everyone is true for all times, and so the more universal a culture is, the closer to Truth it becomes.” In this view, particularity, with its emphasis on what separates and distinguishes one group of people from another, becomes the source of all ills.

But unbridled universalism, too, can be inherently dangerous and is inadequate to understand the world in which we live. “If our commonalities are all that ultimately matter,” the universalist might argue, “then our differences are distractions to be overcome.” Yet it is our differences, our unique characteristics that make each of us a singular human who can make a unique contribution to this world. It is the limitless diversity of the natural world that ensures the adaptation and survival of species, including our own. Our different languages, cultures and points of view strengthen, enliven and enrich us. Universalism is limiting and dangerous when it seeks to blot out difference and to insist that the other must be like me.

We encounter this kind of pernicious universalism, which seeks to create harmony by insisting that we are all the same, in a variety of guises in daily life. In my work, I most often encounter the version that goes, “But aren't all religions really the same, Rabbi? All come down to the same essential principles of peace and being nice to each other.”

While different religions do share broad values – the sacredness of life, living compassionately – the emphases and details vary considerably. We may have vastly different ideas about how the sanctity of life is expressed in law or practice; different ideas about ethical behavior, forgiveness, the form of God, responses to suffering and death. We express and hold these values with different religious vocabularies, stories and rituals. We have different shared memories, myths and religious histories.

To whitewash such differences in the name of all just getting along is not only to wipe out much that valuable; it also creates a whole set of assumptions about shared values that can only lead to misunderstanding and conflict. We only get to true peace if we can find a way to honor and value our differences.

So where does Judaism stand regarding the tension between particularism and universalism? In fact, Torah offers a resounding critique of universalism: The story of the Tower of Babel begins with everyone speaking one language, sharing one culture. They harness the technology of their time, building with bricks, to go up and conquer the heavens – to be in control, to create a hegemony. But this is not in accordance with divine will: God disperses them into multiple cultures and civilizations, speaking different languages. This “attempt to impose a man-made unity on divinely created diversity” fails utterly.

Rabbi Sacks notes that the Hebrew Bible begins with a universal perspective – the creation of everything by a single God, the origin of all of humankind in one man and one woman. But then, as we follow the story from Adam to Noah and eventually to Abraham, the focus narrows to a single family. For Torah, universalism is the starting point, but not the ending point, of humanity. The God of Torah makes a covenant with Noah that is intended for all people. But the faith of Abraham and Sarah is theirs alone. We have a universal God, but not a universal system of belief. And Sacks argues that that's exactly the point:

God is the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference.

A familiar expression of this idea is found in the words of our sages: “The righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come.” (Tosefta, *Sanhedrin* 13 and Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah*, 3:5). Torah itself gives several starring roles to those who are non-members of the Israelite covenant: Jethro, Moses's father-in-law and a Moabite priest, directs Moses in how to establish a judiciary so that Israelite society can function. Tamar, a Canaanite, and Ruth, a Moabite, are not only biblical heroes, but become the ancestors of King David, whose descendant, tradition says, will herald our ultimate redemption. “...Biblical monotheism remains,” in Sacks' words, “not the idea that there is one god and therefore one truth, one faith, one way of life. On the contrary. It is the Idea that unity [God] creates diversity....”

Torah codifies the importance of respect for the other not only in story but in law. “Love your neighbor as yourself. I am Adonai.” “Love the stranger – you know the stranger's heart because you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt” – that one is repeated no less than 36 times!

Why are we told this over and over and over again? We recall and reinforce this not only in Torah, but through the Passover Seder year after year because it is the center of Jewish identity to know the heart of the stranger. We were slaves, we suffered, we were oppressed. The knowledge of how it feels must be in our bones, in our flesh, in our mind, in our tribal memory – in us – and so must be the imperative to know the heart of the stranger and to reach out to him or her with love.

There is another reason for the repetition as well. We need to hear it over and over again because it doesn't come naturally to us. Although acknowledging a common bond with other outsiders is a moral directive that is intimately bound up in our own experience, like all people we would prefer to forget that experience when we can.

In our own day, in this place, although we constitute a tiny minority we have achieved full citizenship, equality and integration in ways that are almost unprecedented in the last two millennia of our history. We have fought hard to belong and to become insiders. Who wants to dwell on what it feels like to be outsiders, much less associate with them? And yet, if we forget or lose this, we lose what is most essential to who we are. Our Jewish souls are at stake.

In our day, in this place, who are among the strangers, who are among the outsiders? To whom should we be reaching out? Before I endeavor to answer that question, let me take a minute to remind you of our history in the United States, and of how short a time has passed since we were outsiders ourselves.

In my grandparents' generation, we were the subject of congressional investigations. Representative John M. Robison of Kentucky described Polish Jewish immigrants in this way:

... filthy, un-American and often dangerous in their habits... most of them nursed hate from their mother's breast... Government to them is slavery and oppression. They have become anarchists, Bolsheviks, communists, and radicals... they become a great recruiting force to the undesirables already here... most of them will never learn the spirit of our institutions and our government.

Of course, when we hear this, we recognize its echoes in every anti-Jewish tirade going back to Haman and Pharaoh: “There is a people in this land who is not like the other citizens. They don't follow our laws or customs, and they may side with our enemies to destroy us...”

In the early decades of the 20th century, Jews were accused of being at the heart of what was then called “white slavery” – we now call it human trafficking – of organized crime, and of plots not only to overthrow the government of the United States, but to take over the world. Henry Ford's anti-Semitic invective in his newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, as well as his publications of “The International Jew” and “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” gave

respectability to the most odious accusations against us. In the 1930s, these accusations were given a “patriotic” gloss by members of the America First movement.

The spreading of fearful, hateful attitudes toward Jews and Judaism had both local and international impact. I remember stories my maternal grandmother, may her memory be a blessing, told me about growing up on the Lower East Side in the early 1900’s. After school kids used to chase her, an immigrant from Eastern Europe, down the street, throwing rocks at her and tossing racial epithets as well. And, more broadly and tragically, Congress enacted the incredibly restrictive immigration laws that barred entry to hundreds of thousands of European Jews before and during World War II.

In the past year we have seen fear and intolerance growing at an alarming rate, both abroad and in our own country, toward those of the Muslim faith. I need hardly list for you the acts and attitudes that many accept as “normal” now: the Congressmen and presumptive presidential candidates who speak of Islam as a danger to the existence of the United States; bills that have been needlessly introduced into state legislatures to prevent Sha’aria, Muslim Law, from overriding the US Constitution; the horrifying massacre in Norway where the murderer was spurred on by US hate blogs.

I am not turning a blind eye to the dangers of extremism. I certainly agree with Rabbi Jill Jacobs, who wrote so eloquently about the King hearings on Muslims in America in the *Washington Post*:

If there are terrorists in the United States – whether these be Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, or atheists – the government should be finding, arresting and bringing to trial those who plot murder.... But investigating an entire ethnic group does nothing to make us safe.

In fact these proceedings distract us from targeted searches for people planning terrorist acts, instill fear and mistrust in an entire religious community, and promote intolerant behaviors toward American citizens and residents.

Do we need our state legislatures to pass statutes preventing “foreign laws” from taking precedence over the Constitution, which is already, by definition, the supreme law of the land? Or is the nationwide drive to introduce such bills – instigated by a member of the Jewish community, a Hasidic lawyer in Brooklyn – simply an effort at fear-mongering?

As Americans committed to democracy and freedom of religion, as Jews having ourselves experienced discrimination and the spreading of fear and distrust about how American we are and can be, we must take a stand against rising Islamophobia in this country.

The first part of combating fear, of course, is knowledge. How many of us are really familiar with Islam, with its literature and customs? How many of us know the guiding principles of the Muslim faith, or understand Shariah and its development?

How many of us can differentiate between fundamentalist and progressive approaches within Islam? If your knowledge – like mine – is not as great as it could be, how shall we proceed?

Near the beginning of my remarks this morning, I said that I would offer concrete steps that we could take to increase our understanding of those from other faith traditions. This year, we will offer a series of classes to introduce us to Islam. UNC Professor of Religious Studies Omid Safi, a leading voice in the Progressive Muslim movement, has agreed to help us build bridges of understanding. This coming winter, Prof. Safi will lead a three- part series for Kehillah members, covering the structure of the Qu'ran and an introduction to the life of Muhammad. We'll then look at the development of different streams of Modern Islam. And finally we'll talk about Jewish - Muslim relations both in the past and the present, explore the roots of Islamophobia today, and think and speak honestly and open-heartedly both about our differences and about what unites us.

The act of engaging in true dialogue is rarely easy. It requires that we face another who is different from us. After all, we don't need to build bridges with ourselves, or with people whose beliefs and opinions are exactly the same as ours. But our goal is understanding [not always agreement], and our task is sacred:

At the center of the Tabernacle was the Holy of Holies, where the tablets of the covenant were stored. Above them were two cherubim, two divine beings, who faced each other. Torah tells us that from the space in between them, the voice of God issued forth. Like the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant, it is when we face each other -- when we encounter and engage with others fully in the kind of relationship that Martin Buber called "I-Thou" -- that we bring God into our midst.

Rabbi Sacks cautions us:

Nothing has proved harder in the history of civilization than to see God, or good, or human dignity in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is a different colour, whose faith is not my faith and whose truth is not my truth.

But he teaches, too, that:

The truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that God is greater than religion... [God] is only partially comprehended by any faith. ... Like being secure in one's home, yet moved by the beauty of foreign places... those who are confident in their faith are not threatened but enlarged by the different faith of others."

Let us begin this New Year, then, with confidence and courage and hope. May we respond to fear with dialogue and learning. May our lives be enriched with knowledge and understanding. And when we take on that most essential of Jewish challenge -- when we seek to know the stranger, remembering that we have ourselves been strangers -- may we become ever more aware of the presence of God.

L'Shana Tovah u'vracha u'metukah. May it be a good, and a blessed, and a sweet year for us all.