

SERMON ON INCLUSION AT TEMPLE ISRAEL CENTER

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Parashat Naso: 12 Sivan 5776 – June 18, 2016

Pirkei Avot enumerates for us ten miracles that happened regularly in the time of the Temple. The tenth is this:

“Lo amar adam la-haveiro ‘tzar li ha-makom she-alin bi-rushalayim” --

“No one ever said to another person: the space is too constricted in Jerusalem for me to be able to stay over there.”

This is usually interpreted to mean that somehow they never ran out of “room at the inn”. But think about the phrase. It doesn't say that everyone always found a place. Instead, it imagines a likely conversation and then says that such a conversation, as likely and expected that it is, happily never happened in Jerusalem. The imagined conversation is something like this, and most of us will recognize it: One person says to another, "you ought to come with me to place X, to event Y. You'll find it so inspiring." And the other, for whatever reason, says "No, I don't think so. I don't really think I'll fit in there. They define their space pretty narrowly; it's too constricted. I'm not really wanted there." And so we are told that although it is so easy to imagine such conversations taking place, and although such conversations in fact happen all the time, they never did when it came to the pilgrimage in Jerusalem. When one person invited another to go, the other felt fully included, and knew that he or she would be fully welcome there.

Why is a counted as a miracle? Precisely because it so goes against the usual course of human affairs, in which inclusion is hardly to be taken for granted, and in which people routinely are made to feel -- whether deliberately or inadvertently -- that they are not fully welcome, or are at best merely tolerated. When that doesn't happen, it can truly be said to be a miracle.

Sadly, it is in Jerusalem itself -- today's Jerusalem -- that events have fallen far short of the miracle celebrated in that Mishnah in Pirkei Avot.

Two items:

Five months ago, the Israeli government took a monumentally important step by approving, by a vote of 15-5, the creation of a permanent and well constructed and maintained space at the Robinson's Arch area specifically for egalitarian prayer services. Under the terms of the agreement, the new prayer area would qualify for government funding and be operated by a council comprised of representatives of the government, the Reform and Conservative movements, the Jewish Agency, the Jewish Federations of North America, and Women of the Wall. We were deeply appreciative of what the government had done, and indeed, Yizhar Hess, the executive director of the Masorti movement in Israel, called the move "historic," saying that the government had recognized in a formal way "the simple, basic and natural fact that there is more than one way to be Jewish." Monumental, because at a time when there is legitimate and ongoing concern about the strength of the connection between Israel and the American Jewish Diaspora – and especially the young American Jewish Diaspora -- this was a signal that "you are welcome here. As equals. Not just tolerated. But embraced."

The euphoria and the gratitude to the Netanyahu government were, alas, short-lived. In the five months since the decision was made, nothing has been done to implement it. And indeed, on Tuesday of this week, a group of ultra-Orthodox Jews, led by a former chief Rabbi of Israel, entered this space, with a police escort no less, erected a Mehitza at the site, and held an Orthodox service there. You see, it is not enough that the entire main Kotel Plaza is designated and run as an Orthodox synagogue. The existence of a place – any place -- for those who worship and believe differently could not be tolerated. So two days ago, given no choice, an egalitarian prayer service was held in the more public section of the main Kotel Plaza, well before you get to the defined prayer space, as a way of claiming our right as Jews to pray near the site of our ancient center of worship. The State Attorney General affirmed the right of our group to hold the service there. But still, ultra-Orthodox protesters came, and there was jeering, offensive language, shoving, and by some reports even some sexual harassment directed at female worshipers. But the police who had escorted the Haredi invaders of Robinson's Arch in contravention of a government decision two days earlier? They were nowhere to be seen protecting this group that was simply asserting its recognized rights.

The space was being so tightly constricted that who could possibly blame a young American Jew from our traditional egalitarian communities for saying, "the space is too constricted in Jerusalem for me to be able to find my place there." What a galling outcome of what began so hopefully. And what a tragedy for Zionism itself.

It will be helpful for all of you to let the arms of the organized Jewish community, with whom you interact and whom you help fund, know of your deep concern about this. Because that Jewish leadership is largely on the same page with us, but they need to know that we care and will stand behind them. Whether it is Federation, American Jewish Committee, ADL, or any other organization. They need to know that it is our concern, so that it will be among their top concerns as well. It is truly about the future of Zionism and of Israel's willingness and ability to be a unifier and inspirer of Jews everywhere.

The second item moves us to a somewhat broader scale among Zionist concerns:

Last November there was another monumental decision arrived at by an Israeli government-appointed commission, and approved unanimously by the Cabinet. It was to approve, finally, the aliyah of some 9000 Ethiopian Jews, who were still left in Ethiopia, because they were of the Falash Mura, the group of Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity in the 19th century. These 9000 have returned to Judaism, have been living and learning as Jews, speaking Hebrew, and praying as Jews in Jewish compounds in Gondar and in Addis Ababa, far from their original villages. We rejoiced at the news, and in this instance as well, we felt gratitude and admiration for the Netanyahu government for taking this historic, humanitarian, and deeply Zionist step. But in the months since, the decision has lain fallow, and the Prime Minister has in effect rejected his own commission's recommendation. The aliyah of the Falash Mura is being blocked still, despite the fact that many of them have close relatives in Israel, and even more important, do not have a safe option of returning to their villages of origin. The space has been tightly constricted again, so that 9000 people who have chosen Judaism and aliyah now have to say, so sadly, "the space is too constricted in Jerusalem for me to be able to find my place there."

I have just agreed to sign a petition to the Israeli government that says, among other things, the following:

"We are mystified at why the Israeli government would undermine a righteous and appropriate policy of kibbutz galuyot (bringing home those yearning to return to Israel), which is consistent with Jewish values and with the spirit of the Law of Return.....The prophet Zekhariah looked forward to the day when "people from every nation and language would take hold of a Jew by the corner of his cloak, and say 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'." The prophet, of course, did not have only Europeans from France, Spain and the Former Soviet Union in mind....We are committed to helping ensure that the State of Israel welcomes Jews of all colors as it fulfills the prophetic call."

I will keep you informed. And please keep yourself informed. This, too, is about inclusion.

These events (and non-events) in Israel are troublesome, but at least they did not directly cost any lives. We cannot say that, alas, about our own country this week. And while what happened in Orlando has all sorts of ramifications in many areas, including the battle against terrorism, immigration policy, intergroup and interfaith relations in this country, and of course, the regulation of guns, we will not touch any of these touchy subjects just now. But we cannot ignore the fact that that happened in Orlando was most immediately and fatally a targeted act of hatred and violence against the LGBTQ community.

It is painful, but more or less straightforward, to connect to the grief of the families whose loved ones were murdered at the Pulse Night Club. But it may not be nearly so easy, from the outside, to understand the impact that these horrors have on those who were not there and who were not attacked this time. I am grateful to Chari Goldberg for directing me to a blog post that helps us in this respect. This is part of what it says:

"Here's the thing you need to understand about every LGBT person in your family, your work, and your circle of friends: We've spent most of our lives being aware that we are at risk.....when I reach to hold [my partner's] hand in

the car, I still do the mental calculation of "ok, that car is just slightly behind us so they can't see, but that truck to my left can see right inside the car". If we kiss in public, I'm never fully in the moment. I'm always parsing who is around us and paying attention to us. There's a tension that comes with that... a literal tensing of the muscles as you brace for potential danger. Those little PDAs you take for granted with your spouse? They come with huge baggage for us. For a lot of us, it's become such an automatic reaction that we don't even think about it directly any more. We just do it."

That's what it means to suffer from the pervasive message that the space is not big enough for you, in our hearts, in our minds, in our society. Yes, we are all tolerant. Our movement has opened up to the LGBTQ community. Our synagogue has taken some steps, by rewording its application form to be welcoming to many different family structures, and by an ongoing effort to make our web site a place that seems less and less constricted. But there is always a large gulf between tolerance and full embrace, and more to do.

Our blogger ends by saying something we can all do right away in the aftermath of Orlando: "Reach out to that LGBT person in your life. Friend, co-worker, or family. Just let them know you are thinking of them and you love them. That will mean the world to them right now. I promise you."

Now here's my last story for today, and it concerns what is for many of us perhaps the hardest issue when it comes to LGBT, and that is the "T" -- transness. I was at Camp Ramah in California over Pesah, serving on the faculty for the week. Among the people who were teaching there was a most extraordinary woman who was giving workshops on how risks are strategically analyzed and processed in intelligence communities around the world. She could do this because she is an accomplished and highly credentialed military analyst who has worked at the highest levels of British intelligence, and has taught at Sandhurst, the elite military academy in the UK. Her sessions were substantive and captivating. Her style is authoritative and still completely accessible. In addition, her Torah reading is impeccable. She comes from an Orthodox background and has Haredi relatives in her close family. But perhaps the most surprising thing about her is that her name was originally Aryeh Yehudah, and she transitioned to her current gender identity about 7 years ago. She agreed to give one originally unscheduled session

during the holiday week, in which she spoke candidly and movingly of her own personal journey.

This is what Anna Quindlen once wrote about when she spoke of the Power of One to move your consciousness. One person -- not millions marching on a mall somewhere -- but just one person whom you know, who impresses himself or herself on you with their reality, their genuineness, with their humanity. A rush of humility comes -- or should come -- upon you, when you realize that there are human experiences you have not gone through yourself, but that you have no right to dismiss, for those who have gone through them are also made in the image of God. And many of them are fighting battles.

I do not believe that human nature has changed all that much in several thousand years. And that means that there have always been people whose reality of life is not captured by the neat categories that we create and construct. It is understandable and legitimate that we do this because those constructions reflect the majority. But we must never forget that they are just that, constructions. Just as it is clear to us that there have always been people who are gay or lesbian, I cannot but believe that there have always been people whose gender identity has been a source of confusion and struggle for them in the world constructed around them. Our expanded consciousness today does not mean that we have discovered a new phenomenon. What it does and should tell us is that for thousands of years, there have been good people who have been suffering. And now we have the opportunity to relieve that suffering. To do all that we can not to constrict the space in which human beings -- Jews, when we speak of our own community -- can feel that they are at home. Pirkei Avot was not quite right. It doesn't take a miracle. It only takes attentiveness. And empathy. And humility in the face of a world fashioned by a Creator whose creativity outstrips our human and finite imaginations.

Here's one small step you will soon see here: We have two rest rooms in this building -- one on this floor, and one down below -- that are single use rest rooms. They will continue to be exactly that. But we will do one thing we have not hitherto done: we will be placing signs on the other restrooms in the building letting people know that those single use rooms exist and how to get to them, if using them will make their experience with us more welcoming.

This is what inclusion is about. And why we have been privileged to begin down that road this year. May the road, as we continue to traverse it in empathy and humility, bring blessing to all.