

Diversity
Yom Kippur Evening Sermon 2016/5777
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In every movie or TV show about High School, there is a scene in the lunchroom cafeteria. Each table is an island of students from different backgrounds parsed into a convenient assortment. There is great variation, but not much diversity.

Diversity. It's a word and concept some immediately embrace, and others reject as so-called politically correct. Anna Holmes in *The New York Times* reflected, "How does a word become so muddled that it loses much of its meaning? How does it go from communicating something idealistic to something cynical and suspect?"¹

We've always lived in a diverse country and America is defined by the great variety that makes up her citizens. But difference doesn't always mean integration. New York City of the past had Jews, Italians, Irish, Chinese, African Americans all living here, but in segregated discrete neighborhoods. Is something diverse when our interaction is exclusive? I used to go to a diner that had a 30 page menu. An endless variety with new options every time. Yet each time I went, I ordered the chicken teriyaki. I liked it. I was comfortable with it. Was I some sort of food bigot in a diverse restaurant world?

Living a life of uniformity is safe, comfortable, and bland. It is in interacting with a variety of things outside our own world that one grows, learns, and succeeds.

When things are the same, it is the varied that stands out. This year we mark the 50th anniversary of the premiere of *Star Trek*. It has been noted how the diverse bridge crew of the Enterprise was in stark contrast to everything else on television. In addition to the expected white men were an Asian American helmsman, an African American woman as communications officer, later a young Russian man as navigator, and a literal alien as first mate. The diversity was intentional and allowed *Star Trek* to connect to audiences who hadn't ever seen themselves on the screen before.

And it was powerful though the actors themselves didn't always realize the power of their role. When Nichelle Nichols, who played Lt. Uhura, was planning to leave *Star Trek* for a role on Broadway, she was brought at an NAACP event to meet her "biggest fan." The fan turned out to be Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She told him she was leaving the show and he insisted she best supported civil rights by staying on TV as a professional African American woman. Dr. King said, "For the first time on television, we will be seen as we should be seen every day, as intelligent, quality, beautiful people who can sing and dance, yes, but who can go into space, who can be lawyers and teachers, who can be professors — who are in this day, yet you don't see it on television until [your role]."²

Watching the Olympics this summer made it clear how many varied people are American. As Jews, we should celebrate the variety of American success – by gender, race, ethnicity, country of origin, religion, sexual orientation, special needs, height, weight, eye and hair color, personality, interests, and every other way people can be unique. Such diversity opens us up to new ideas and possibilities, to original concepts and approaches, to a richer, more interesting tableaux.

Scientific American reports that scientific research is of a higher quality when done by a diverse research group. People work harder, are more creative, and are more diligent when they work with or around a diverse group of people.³

Facing variety or something new is a challenge. According to some of the teenagers in our temple, lunchrooms can still be segregated by group, but often students today mix regardless of background with friends connecting more on personality and common interests than anything else. One student added that social media might have made it easier to break down differences adding to the diversity.

We know that diversity is God’s intention. Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor writes, “When I look out the window, I see a myriad of plants, birds, and bugs; when I look around the room I see humans of every shape, size, color, inclination, and ability. Since I believe that God was behind creation, if God wanted only one kind of plant, bird, insect, human, then I believe God could have easily done that. But that is not our reality. Therefore, diversity is implicit in creation. Our job is to complete creation by making this all work together – shalom as completeness and interaction and interdependence.”⁴

The Tower of Babel story is a criticism of unanimity. When everyone only speaks one language, they engage in destructive behavior and try to build a tower to challenge God. When they speak dozens of languages, they build civilization.⁵

Here in Queens, we can’t miss the diversity. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, we live in the most ethnic, racial, and religiously diverse part of America.⁶ People speak 138 different languages in Queens.⁷ Almost half of the residents were born outside the U.S. Diversity challenges us as neighborhoods change, we are surrounded by a variety that can open up new worlds wherever we look.

Things are always changing in the American Melting Pot. Although I’m told Salad Bowl has become the preferred metaphor. Different groups get vilified or

celebrated. People are afraid of new. Changes to their expectations and norms brings rejection and anxiety. We see across this country people who fear others. There is dismissal of immigrants and those called foreigners. There is mourning for a country that is not like it was in decades, a longing to return to society that was dominated by white, straight, Christian men. Too many people today cannot accept changes to reality. But that is not acceptable – this is a growing diverse world and we need to celebrate it.

Especially as Jews. As a people who all came from other places and countries, we have always been seen as the stranger and the outsider, we have a historical impetus to help those that are not like others find a comfortable place and home.

Jewish history is filled our role as the stranger. Jacob notes he was a wandering Aramean, essentially someone who never found a home. We have always found ways to welcome the other. 36 times the Torah tells us to welcome the stranger,⁸ more than any other commandment. We included strangers in the mixed multitude of people who left Egyptian slavery. And though it makes Jonah uncomfortable, the prophet is commanded to try and save his non-Jewish neighbors in Nineveh in tomorrow afternoon's Haftarah portion.

For a long time there were stereotypes of how Jews looked. For the Ultra-Orthodox, the black hat, coat, and long beard defined a Jew. For the rest of American Judaism, a last name ending in "man," "berg," or "stein" was a marker or certain physical features including a Jewish nose, which has its own entry on Wikipedia.⁹

But Judaism has changed remarkably, especially in the Reform and secular communities. Conversion, intermarriage, and adoption have broadened Judaism across racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. One can't identify a Jew on sight as we simply look more and more like America-at-large. 10% of Adult Jews identify as non-white. Jews are gay and straight, they might have blue hair or no hair. Some have prominent tattoos and piercings, and some still pepper their conversation with Yiddish words. What binds us all together is what we believe. We share a cultural history, religious values, rituals, and calendars. As Reform Jews we understand there will be a variety among our community. There remains an essential core that connects us together.

Such are our stories. Michael Sisolak is a member of this Temple with his family, but he is not Jewish. According to his son, he is "whatever." But he attends services regularly with his wife and three children. Michael says, "Despite attending services to support my family instead of worshipping myself, my right to

be a part of the temple has never once been questioned. I have always been welcomed to take part in as much or little of temple life as I wished. My place in the RTFH family has never been judged by my personal beliefs or family heritage, but only by my willingness to accept as I am accepted.” RTFH is a more complete place to have the whole Sisolak family participate in so many ways in our congregation.

Sofia was adopted from China by Bruce Grossberg and Laura Rovinsky at 14 months of age. Being Jewish is all she has ever known. Sofia, now a 5th grader, says, “I don't feel different because I'm treated like a citizen and no one makes fun of me. I enjoy being a Jew because I get to meet new people and get to go to services. I have lots of fun being a Jew especially at this temple.” RTFH is a more wonderful synagogue because Sofia is part of our classroom and friendships.

Jodi Ann Herman has special learning needs and never found a connection to Judaism as a child – both because of her needs and because she was female. The Reform Temple of Forest Hills welcomed her for both. “I found a home here,” she said, “I can be myself.” She joined in actively in many areas of Temple life. Jodi is among the most regular, and certainly the most enthusiastic, participants at Shabbat evening worship and can always be found at Torah Study.

Jodi had her Adult Bat Mitzvah nearly a decade ago and at the service Rabbi Mayer Perelmutter told her that she had transformed the Temple. Because of Jodi, RTFH is more sensitive to the needs of those who are differently abled or have special needs. And we explore in greater depth the challenges of how women are included in Jewish life. If we don't, Jodi will make sure we know about it.

Diversity takes work. Sometimes we don't want to deal with things that need to be changed or adjusted to be more welcoming. Changes in language, concern about food, acceptance of families that are different than the ones we grew up with are hard. While the Clergy, Temple leadership, and office are often the first to interact or respond, it is truly the community at large, all of you, that allow our synagogue to be both diverse and welcoming. It is your kindness, your understanding, and your willingness to interact with people of all sorts that make our Temple more varied and stronger.

Temple member Ann Macklin shared, “The reason I joined was because everyone was so [darn] nice. Not just because I'm gay, but because I'm a person with a kid who came to your shul looking for a place to join...I'm happy to report [my daughter] Ruby has not had any issues. She's very matter of fact about having 2 moms, which is beyond cool.”

Diversity takes work. It can be a challenge to each of us, and not everything clicks immediately, or even over time. It takes work and planning. We are proud that our synagogue is a welcoming home to LGBTQ individuals and families, but we have considered where we could do better. So Cantor Jacobson, Faye Gilman, several lay people, and I will be participating in a program on LGBTQ Inclusion to better explore ways we can be a hospitable and supportive congregation.

That is why *Mishkan Hanefesh* is an ideal *machzor* for our synagogue. It is so diverse with readings, poems, and study options from across the spectrum. It isn't just that words come from traditional Jewish sources like Maimonides, Ibn Ezra, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, but also from modern poets like Ruth Brin and Yehudai Amichai, and even from non-Jewish writers like Oliver Wendell Holmes and Walt Whitman.

The prayerbook allows for a variety of religious opinions and approaches. "Theologically, the liturgy needed to include many perceptions of God: The Transcendent the naturalist, the mysterious, the partner, the evolving God...we should sense all these ways. ...Over the course of praying many voices are heard and ultimately come together as one."¹⁰

One technique used is called Integrated Theology. It allows on any give page spread a variety of views on God. For example, in the Avinu Malkeinu, God might be presented as both father and mother, powerful and omnipotent, gentle and comforting.¹¹ It even has for the first time in any machzor I've used readings that doubt or question the existence of God. One reading for Avinu Malkeinu asks:

"*Avinu Malkeinu*, why

Avinu Malkeinu are you there? Do you care?

Avinu Malkeinu, hear our pain.

Hear our anger. Hear our grief.

...Restore our faith in life. Restore our faith in you."¹²

With transliteration, recognizing that not everyone here can read Hebrew well or even at all, it opens the pages up to a wider audience. And while the Rabbi and Cantor choose which prayers, songs, and readings are done at any given service, you are always invited to explore the depth of the prayerbook on you own and find the parts that fit to your individuality.

This is a diverse prayerbook for our diverse community. It even tells in one reading in the *machzor*, "Diversity is built into the human condition; our tradition regards it as a blessing."¹³

What a blessing to live in a diverse world, a diverse city, to be part of a diverse congregation. Because we are different from the people around us and we can learn more, do more, and create more when we come together as a community. And for those in our society who reject the other, the simple truth is they are wrong. This is our teaching from Judaism and this is the words from *Mishkan Hanefesh*:

“To think the same way, to share the same opinions –

This is not peace.

Unity is not uniformity.

True peace comes through the express of differences;

Many perspectives, each offering a partial view of truth.

Shalom means wholeness.

Only when we open ourselves to understand all sides of an issue
will we attain peace.

And so it is written: *Torah scholars increase peace in the world.*

Through their disagreements truth will emerge and we will find *shalom*.¹⁴

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/magazine/has-diversity-lost-its-meaning.html>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/09/08/why-star-trek-was-so-important-to-martin-luther-king-jr/>

³ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-diversity-makes-us-smarter/>

⁴ Written in a Facebook post to me in a private group.

⁵ Genesis 11.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Queens

⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/29/nyregion/29lost.html>

⁸ <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/honoring-the-other-or-the-stranger-by-rabbi-zalman-kastel>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_nose

¹⁰ *Divrei Mishkan Hanefesh* 114.

¹¹ *Mishkan Hanefesh Rosh Hashanah* Avinu Malkeinu 222-225.

¹² *Mishkan Hanefesh Yom Kippur* 113.

¹³ *Mishkan Hanefesh Yom Kippur* 403.

¹⁴ *Mishkan Hanefesh Rosh Hashanah* 215 based on Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.