

Leading with *Hesed*

There is a story about the great Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, who, for many years, taught rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary. His subject was homiletics, which is essentially the art of crafting a sermon. Kaplan had a reputation for being an exacting, even tyrannical teacher. Every week, he would expound on the weekly Torah portion on Tuesday, and then on Thursday, his students would have to present in class their own expositions. Kaplan would regularly rip their ideas to shreds. Well, one student, who felt particularly oppressed by Rabbi Kaplan, decided that he would outwit him by writing down word for word what Kaplan said on Tuesday, and presenting it back to him on Thursday. And that's exactly what happened. Nevertheless, Kaplan, with a withering glance, responded, "That's terrible. I've never heard such shallow, illogical drivel!" "But Rabbi Kaplan," exclaimed the exasperated student, "that's EXACTLY what you said to us on Tuesday!" To which Rabbi Kaplan replied: "Well, I've changed since Tuesday!"

My friends, The *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, are about our ability to change. And nothing is as difficult as change, particularly in changing times.

Kaplan was a brilliant thinker, who actually foresaw a sea-change in the way we, American Jews, understand what it means to be Jewish. He titled the first of his many books, published back in 1932, "Judaism as a Civilization." Essentially, Kaplan's thesis had two parts. The first is that Judaism could never be conveniently pigeonholed as a religion, similar in kind to Christianity, because Judaism is actually a religious civilization, a people with a unique culture, history, language and literature, with its distinct concepts of God at its core. The second part is

that, after leaving 2,000 years of ghetto life behind, Judaism, particularly in America, would have to undergo a thorough reconstruction of thought, religious practice and culture, if it were to survive and thrive in the modern age.

In 1941, he published a New Haggadah for Passover, an innovative updating of the traditional text. In response, the entire JTS faculty issued a unanimous letter to Kaplan, condemning him for liturgical blasphemy. And, when Kaplan published a new prayer book four years later, a group of Orthodox Rabbis in New York City responded by placing him in *herem* (excommunication), and actually staging a public burning of the prayer book.

Nothing is as difficult as change.

Kaplan was restricted at JTS to teaching homiletics, rather than Jewish philosophy, or other weightier disciplines, because of his radical views. And what were some of those ideas?

- That God could be conceived of as a process, rather than as a personality; God, in Kaplan's beautiful words, is "the power that makes for salvation."
- That we should consider changing traditional religious language in our prayer books if we find the concepts intellectually offensive;
- That, in contemporary western society, in which women were fully equal, Judaism would have to bestow that same equality upon women, as well. The world's first Bat Mitzvah was Rabbi Kaplan's daughter Judith, who celebrated that event in 1922.

Kaplan died at the ripe old age of 102, in 1983. His life spanned the distance from the Lithuania of his youth, to the modern American University; from the mass migration of European Jewry to these shores at the turn of the 20th century to the rapid and total integration of Jews into the mainstream by its end. He began his professional career as an Orthodox rabbi, taught generations of Conservative rabbis, and, in his final years, was the father of a new movement,

Reconstructionism which, I would suggest, ultimately influenced all movements within American Judaism.

Accepting and living with change is difficult. Yet, much as we might not like to recognize it, change is the essential characteristic of life.

I thought about the rapid pace of change this summer with the passing of one of the Jewish world's great personalities, Elie Wiesel. Who would have imagined that a yeshiva bocher from Sighet, Hungary, whose first exposure to the secular world was Auschwitz, would become the revered moral voice on behalf of oppressed peoples around the world? As a witness to the Holocaust he spoke for the living and the dead. As a writer, he brought the moral arguments against God, and humanity, into public discourse, at a time when others were still numbed into silence. As a teacher, he had a reputation for having great respect for every student; even a few words from him could make a deep and lasting impression. As a prophetic voice, he spoke to presidents and princes on behalf of all victims of oppression.

Wiesel's journey from Auschwitz, from stateless refugee, to speaking truth to power in the White House, would be unimaginable, if it hadn't actually occurred. His life bore witness to the Jewish people's survival, and to our remarkable resilience and renewal. Consider that in the span of a single lifetime, the Jewish people have moved from powerlessness to power, with the creation of the State of Israel. And, in America, Judaism has moved from marginal to mainstream, from exotic, to quintessentially normal. Wiesel bridged these tectonic shifts with grace and humility.

Elie Wiesel's son, Elisha, reminisced that once, as a freshman in college, he returned home with his hair dyed purple, and cut in a Mohawk. His father said to him: "I love you, and I would walk down the street with you anytime, anywhere. I am not embarrassed. I would take

you to shul like this, and out to dinner. I love you. You are my son. You can do anything you want, as long as you marry Jewish.” That was one of the two requests, that through the years, the father would make of his son: to marry Jewish, and to one day say Kaddish for him.

A tender glimpse into the family life of a great man. And yet, I can’t help seeing a poignancy in this anecdote. For, in the world in which Elie Wiesel was raised, he never would have needed to tell his son that it was important to marry a Jew. Such a choice would have been unthinkable. But in America, even Wiesel, who undoubtedly bestowed upon his son the full richness of Jewish education and tradition, still had to at least acknowledge the possibility. For, while in the past, to marry a non-Jew was to signal a rejection of one’s heritage and community, today, that simply isn’t the case. In America, people marry who they fall in love with, and their choice bears little or no reflection on their love for the Jewish values and experiences with which they were raised.

And this, as Mordecai Kaplan understood so many decades ago, is the biggest change that America represents: Our identity as Jews is no longer a given. In the free marketplace of ideas, it competes among many other attractive and compelling possibilities. And more, even when we claim our Jewish identity, it is no longer our *only* identity.

As Leon Wieseltier quipped a few years ago, *“I hear it said of somebody that he is leading a double life. I think to myself, just two?”* He explains that in our culture of diversity, *‘...identity is a promise of singleness, but this is a false promise. Many things are possible in America, but the singleness of identity is not one of them...Not: my identity, but: my identities.’*

Let me put it this way. I am a Jew, a Zionist, and a patriotic American. I am also a feminist, and a dyed in the wool second generation Democrat. You might be some of those things too. You might also identify yourself as a member of Red Sox Nation, or as a social

activist, a Republican, a vegetarian, Mason, or maybe as an Ivy-League alum. We all wear many hats; we have multiple identities, which overlap, but are not identical, with the people around us. And, we are free to drop, or add new ones, as we will. That's America. That's the real change in the world in which we live today.

Now, I may fervently want the Jewish part of your identity to be your core one, your most important one. But that's not up to me. That's your choice.

It's difficult, when you are living right in the middle of a period of unprecedented change, to fully comprehend its impact, or to know how to wisely and effectively deal with its effects. So we stick to the old paradigms, to what we know, even after they have ceased being effective. A good example of this is how we, as Conservative Jews, understand and engage with intermarriage.

For those of us for whom Judaism is our core identity, the lens through which we understand ourselves, our purpose, and ultimately, our connection to the very Source of Life, it is easy to see this culture of infinite choices not only as a blessing, but also as a grave danger. Judaism risks becoming thinner; just one more piece to fit somewhere into our schedule, or not, rather than the grand, covenantal project that has charted the course of our people's history and spirit since the days of the Bible. And, if we want Judaism to be that for our children, then we have to work even harder to mold our family life to the rhythms of the Jewish calendar, from Shabbat to Shabbat, and season to season. We have to encounter the great spiritual practices of our people, and make them our own, we have to educate ourselves so that we can talk the talk and walk the walk of a culturally rich, living Judaism. And, we have to talk to our children, early and often, about why marrying someone who shares those values and with whom they can grow together in Jewish practice is very important. And even then, the world being what is, it is

still not up to us. We have to give up our desire to control the outcome. Facing the fact that our ability to control the tidal wave of cultural change is very limited, it is easy to be overcome by anxiety, and fear for the future of the Jewish people.

One response is to circle the wagons, by making the boundaries clear and expressing our disapproval for those who cross them. As recently as 1983, Rabbi Joel Roth authored a teshuva (rabbinical responsum) for our Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, albeit a minority opinion, which re-affirmed an earlier opinion that Jews who intermarried should not be given *aliyot*, or allowed to sit on the synagogue board. Allowing such honors, he wrote would bestow upon intermarriage “...an aura of legitimacy that is counterproductive to the greater needs of the Jewish community. How hollow our classes, lecture and sermons against intermarriage must sound when we allow the leadership of our synagogues to be entrusted to those whose very marriages are anathema to us.” Similarly, the United Synagogue affirmed a policy, around the same year, that intermarriages should not be acknowledged in synagogue bulletins.

Well that’s one approach. It’s a fear based approach. And, if its intended effect was to cause young people in love to rethink their marriage plans, lest they be denied an *aliyah*, clearly, it hasn’t worked. Incidentally, in case you were wondering, in Temple Israel, intermarried Jews have never been denied *aliyot*, or the right to serve on the board, and beginning last year, intermarriages are acknowledged, along with all family life cycle events, in our Temple bulletin.

But what about their loved ones, their non-Jewish partners, who have become beloved members of our families? A different approach, also widely discussed since the early 1980’s is the more expansive approach of Keiruv, which is the Hebrew term for outreach. Rather than condemn people for their choices, the question now becomes, how can we respect families for who they are, and welcome in those interfaith families who desire to be connected to the Jewish

community, and who want Judaism to shape their home-life in some way? And can we do that lovingly, sincerely, and without judgment? For the past twenty-five years, I have encouraged and welcomed interfaith families to find a place for themselves here with us. Some of you are sitting here today. It is Temple Israel's obligation, I tell them, to welcome and to help every family that wants to establish a Jewish home and raise Jewish children.

I remember the first Bnai- Mitzvah at which I officiated, twins, just weeks after I arrived at Temple Israel 25 years ago. There was no role at all for the non-Jewish Dad, who sat alone in the first row, while his children celebrated the ritual of coming of age on our *bima*. He looked uncomfortable, and ignored. I never forgot that. Soon afterwards, our policy became more inclusive, and we would invite both parents to say an English blessing to their child, after the Haftarah was completed. Since then, we have modified the ceremony several times. Currently, interfaith parents do come up to the *bima* together for an *aliyah*, even though only the Jewish partner is saying the blessing.

If we really mean what we say about respecting individuals for who they are, and acknowledging the complicated nature of identity today, then our ability to listen and really hear has to be increasingly more thoughtful and nuanced. My personal approach is to overlook the theoretical questions of boundaries and precedents, and to be guided instead by the following question: where is the *Hesed* here? Where is the Divine quality of Lovingkindness waiting to manifest? Yes, *Din*, boundaries, are important. But, as the Rabbis teach, *Hesed Yibaneh Olam*: The world is built and sustained through Lovingkindness.

Let me share with you a story. A couple once came to talk to me about converting their infant daughter to Judaism. The father was Jewish, and his wife, raised as a Christian, was non-practicing, and not interested in affiliating with any organized religion. However, she had made

a promise to her father-in-law, a Holocaust survivor, that when they had children, they would raise them as Jews. It was a deathbed promise, and, she tearfully told me, she was determined to fulfill it. So we brought their baby to the mikveh, and formally converted her to Judaism.

Now, fast forwarding 13 years later, these same parents are sitting in my office discussing their daughter's upcoming bat Mitzvah. Out of a desire to support her daughter, and to be part of the process too, the mother, who never converted to Judaism, spent the entire year with a tutor, learning to read Hebrew.

The conversation was not an easy one. I had to explain that, even though she could now read Hebrew, it was against our synagogue ritual for her to have an *aliyah* with her husband. I explained that it would be inauthentic for someone who did not identify as a Jew, to say this blessing, which thanks God for giving us, the Jewish people, the Torah. Her husband was indignant. If he couldn't have an *aliyah* with his wife, he said, then he didn't want one either!

I thought of the first time I met this family 13 year earlier, and the road that they had travelled since, and I remembered the promise that she had once made. So I said, "You can't honestly say the traditional blessing. But the Torah, God's revelation, is accessible everyone. What if you said a different blessing, something that reflected your truth, why you are standing at the Torah?" And so together, we created a blessing, which she said, in Hebrew and in English, on the *bima*, right before her husband recited the traditional blessing. It went, "*Blessed are You Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has helped me to keep my promise to bring our daughter to the Torah.*"

I knew that some of the Jews in the congregation that Shabbat morning would be uncomfortable, that we were crossing a real boundary, by allowing a non-Jew access to a sacred, covenantal moment. The public reading of the Torah is, after all, a ritual reenactment of the

Jewish people standing at Sinai. And I knew that people would ask if we were creating a precedent; would every interfaith family now write their own alternative *aliyah* blessing? I was asking myself these same questions.

But *hesed trumps boundaries*. This was the right thing, the *hesed-dik* thing, for this family, and that was more important than questions about precedents.

Boundaries are necessary, because they help us clarify and define things. But we cling to them, sometimes too tightly, out of fear; hoping in vain to stem the tide of change. Once, maybe 15 years ago, a member of our congregation came to me with a request. Could her son, who was marrying a girl who was not Jewish, celebrate the upcoming marriage with an *aufruf*. An *aufruf* is when a groom and bride are called to the Torah for an *aliyah* and for a *mishebeirach*, a blessing in anticipation of the wedding. It's an opportunity for the community, who can't all be present at the wedding, to celebrate with the couple. We typically sing *siman tov u'mazal tov*, and throw candy at the couple. Now, it was beyond my imagination to even consider such a scenario. I responded no, it wasn't possible. I'm sorry, you can't have an *aufruf* for an interfaith wedding.

I have to tell you, I remember that very brief conversation after all these years, for two reasons: First, because I knew I didn't adequately respond to the anguish that I could see in this person's face. And second, because I knew that this boundary which I would not cross, was also limiting my choices, and our community's choices, in how we might have reached out to, and maintained a relationship, with the young man who grew up here, and the young woman whom he loved.

But the world changes, and we change. On a Shabbat morning a couple of months ago, a member of the shul whose daughter would be celebrating her marriage in an interfaith ceremony

later that week, asked he could have an *aliyah* that morning, because she was coming to *shul* later that very morning, and if I would say a blessing of some kind. This was precedent setting. We had never done this before. But I know this girl. And I know that she cherishes her Judaism, and wants to be connected to her *shul*, even though I, her rabbi, would not officiate at her wedding. So I paused, and thought to myself, “where is the *hesed* here- what is the loving thing to do?” And then, I looked at the Dad and smiled, and said, “of course.” After her *aliyah*, I gave a *mishebeirach*, an improvised blessing from the heart, wishing her and her future husband love and happiness with each other.

Since then, another couple has come for such a blessing, and still another is scheduled in the coming year. It’s not exactly the same as an *aufruf*; instead of singing *siman tov u’ mazal tov*, we sing *shehecheyanu*, which is a more universal blessing of gratitude for the moment, and therefore, more respectful to the non-Jewish partner. And my blessing focuses on marriage, rather than on the wedding ceremony, on a future of love and happiness that we really do hope their marriage will bring them.

I know that some of you are thinking, “Rabbi, you are encouraging intermarriage; you are signaling to the children sitting in *shul* that intermarriage is not a serious issue for the Jewish people, when you offer such a blessing on the *bima*!” Maybe...but I don’t believe so, although we can never know with certainty the ripple effects of our actions. But I do know that making decisions from a place of *hesed* is more wholesome and more connective, than making decisions from a place of fear. Fear is something we actually feel in our bodies as a constriction, a tightening up. Love and compassion are infinitely more expansive.

My friends, the world changes, and we change too. I must admit that for me, the ability to allow certain boundaries to fall, and to be guided instead by *Hesed*, has been a slow and

gradual spiritual shift. I can tell you with certainty that it is the fruit of my personal practice of Jewish meditation and prayer, which has deepened over the years.

Spiritual practice helps me to remember that impermanence and change, really is the truth of our experience. And it helps me to recognize *Hesed*, Divine Love and Compassion, as more than a theological concept; but as a felt, bodily experience, rooted in the heart.

My friends, in the coming year, may we all be less fearful and more loving. May we struggle less with the inevitability of change, and discover the ways in which we ourselves *can* change. And may *Hesed* be our touchstone and our guide.