

*The following D'var Torah, or commentary on the weekly reading of the Torah, was recently delivered by Svi Shapiro at the Beth Meyer Synagogue in Raleigh North Carolina as part of the synagogue's Sabbath celebration of the Progressive Kehillah (community), a group formed to be a catalyst for progressive ideas and commitments within the larger synagogue congregation.*

### **On Being a Progressive Jew: My Journey**

Today's Parsha is Ha'azinu. It tells of the sad end of Moses life when he is unable to enter the promised land but is able only to view it from afar. Rabbi Shai Held in his commentary on this notes that the central question for the midrash is not whether or not Moses will get to see the land, but whether or not he will go on living. And God's answer is very different from what we might have expected. There is no language of punishment here, no sense that his death is the consequence of wrong doing. Instead dying is simply human nature. Moses has to die, God tells him, because this is what it means to be human. For all Moses exalted status, he is only human. But, Held continues, more than this Moses dies because his work is done. The people have now the word of God and that will be there guide in the new land. Rabbi Held puts it this way:" Moses has to die so that Judaism can become a text-centered religion. Judaism is to become in future generations an interpretive project, a never ending process of reading and making sense of the word of God"

Our group, the Progressive Kehillah at Beth Meyer is made up of a small number of members of this synagogue who have come together over the past year in the interpretive spirit of this post –Moses Judaism. A spirit in which we struggle to make sense of what it means to be Jews in this era of demonization of refugees and immigrants, growing intolerance of those who are different, a nation still deeply divided by racial inequality, where there is increasing polarization of wealth and power, where affordable health care for all is still a dream for many, and where so much of our national wealth gets spent on the weapons of war, and where we have a president who demeans, degrades so many of our

fellow citizens and punishes would be citizens and their children. We are concerned too about growing racism and religious intolerance in Israel and continued denial of Palestinian rights. We don't have all the answers but our Judaism makes it clear that we must *nishma* and *na'aseh*, we must hear and we must act. We are of course a group of individuals who have a range of ideas and beliefs and where we value a respectful discourse and exchange of ideas. So, speaking as one of those individuals, I want this morning to take you down the path of that Judaism that has brought me to define myself as a progressive Jew, to talk briefly about 5 things in my Jewish experience, values and meanings that have shaped my hopes, dreams, moral and intellectual commitments as I look out upon our society and world.

I start with *Tikkun Olam* which speaks to the need among human beings for an authentic life of meaning. It rests on the mythic Hebrew vision of a world that has overcome division and fragmentation, and instead become whole and united as a single caring community. The struggle for such a world becomes in this vision the overriding moral responsibility of human beings in this life. More than this, it is through the act of trying to create a world of compassionate and loving connection in the face of all the divisions, injustices, conflicts and suffering that beset us that we are able to find the most profound sense of meaning in our lives. For a Jewish boy growing up in London in a working class family, in a society permeated by class inequalities and a dominant Christian culture, the radical prophetic vision of justice and inclusion spoke easily to my mind and spirit. The message of *Tikkun Olam* speaks out against the false and distorted 'meanings' of our culture. And those who educate in its spirit mince no words in calling into question the dehumanizing, vulgar and over-commercialized values that shape our lives, especially that of the young. We make clear that everything that separates and fragments our world—war, torture, racism, demonization of immigrants and refugees, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, virulent or arrogant nationalism, economic exploitation and slavery, all must be called into question and challenged. To educate in this spirit means encouraging us all, both young and not so young, to see their lives in terms of the contribution each might make to healing the brokenness of

our world, and to see how we might act to redress intolerance, indignity and injustice—all the things that fragment and split apart our world.

But in the end questions about social justice, a more caring community and the end of violence can be reduced, I believe, to the need to see the extraordinary and unconditional value of each human life. To affirm this is to oppose all those things that diminish, degrade or destroy a life. The concept of the beauty and ineffable value of human life is an ancient one. Perhaps I got this understanding at an early age from my mother's simple refusal to allow even toy guns in our house. In my later Jewish studies I encountered the biblical message of *B'tselem Elohim*—the belief that human beings are made in the image of God. It is a belief, I quickly came to see, is one that underpins our notions of democracy, civil rights, and more recently, human rights. In each case what is asserted is the conviction that societies and institutions must exist for the sake of the realization and fulfillment of an individual's potentialities and capabilities; they must ensure conditions that honor the integrity and inviolability of each person. It goes without saying that the actual conditions that have faced human beings have always fallen far short of this noble aspiration. Yet its power as a template for measuring the quality, fairness and humanness of a society is undeniable, and a continuing catalyst for social, political, cultural and economic change.

In an essay I wrote shortly after 9-11, on the lessons we might draw from this sad event I noted, in particular, one thing. When the first responders raced up the stairs of the World Trade Center buildings they were not concerned with whether the people they were trying to save were men or women, gay or straight, Black or white, Muslim, Christian or Jewish, American born or immigrants. They were concerned only, at great danger to themselves, with trying to save lives. Here in this moment of terrible tragedy was a ray of light—the brave, unquestioning insistence that any and all lives had inestimable value and were worth saving from this catastrophe. At this defining moment a life was a life no matter what's its skin color, religious belief, gender or sexual orientation, country of origin. And recently we have witnessed the same behavior from first responders and volunteers courageously trying to save lives after the destructive effects of Hurricane Florence in this state.

Our work as teachers, as well parents, must be to emphasize our shared humanity and the preciousness of every life while honestly and forthrightly pointing to the ways we think and act that contradict and conflict with this conviction. The institution of school itself provides a powerful space for highlighting such conflict with its pervasive hierarchical ranking, competitive-individualism, tracking and the differentiation of individual worth, social cliques and social status, bullying, and demeaning of those who might not fit the cultural or gender norms. What would it mean, we may ask, for us to act in ways that ensures that the worth and dignity of every person whether in our schools or elsewhere is recognized and respected? This might also speak to the terrible epidemic of violence carried out by individuals most often in our schools who have become marginalized and demeaned in the school culture. What would it mean for us to do that with every life on earth?

Jewish experience has taught me that to respect ideas is not the same as meekly accepting whatever one is told. There is a nice story told about the mother of the Nobel laureate in physics Isidor Rabi. He says what made him a scientist was the fact that while every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school, nu did you learn anything today? My mother always asked me a different question. “Izzy” she would say, “did you ask any good questions today?”

One key to this readiness to contest others assertions or beliefs seems to lie in the Jewish penchant for argument, and a deep seated attitude of suspicion to whatever is merely given to us or presented. Questioning the authority and truth claims of those in power is the enduring legacy of our prophetic Judaism. Certainly in whatever Jewish circles I have moved the love of argument has always seemed to be present. From my earliest years in my parents’ home I learned the pleasures of contradiction—there was parental pride in disputatious children! Somehow I learned to approach truth with a Talmudic eye. Whatever is the ultimate ‘Truth’ the truth for each generation has to be won through the hard work of intellectual interrogation and critical reason. The text, whether sacred Torah or indeed this nation’s constitution, provides no comforting certainty of established understanding—much more it

challenges human beings to elicit meaning from situation to situation, and from generation to generation. The only certainty, as our rabbis have taught us, is the give and take of argument. The great Talmudic scholar Jacob Neusner described it this way:

**“The Talmud taught the Jews not to be terrified by the necessity to face and to choose among a plurality of uncertain alternatives in an insecure world. The Talmud testified that people must choose, if tentatively, and for a time, only among competing interpretations...it insisted that one cannot be paralyzed before contrary claims and equally persuasive reasons.”**

So here was a whole other way to view knowledge. Far from evidence of disrespect it is our obligation as Jews to always call into question what we are led to believe and told is true. Our job as Jews is to be critical interrogators of what we are told—especially by those in power or authority. Not so we become cynics who say everything is only fake news, but to search beneath the surface of what we are told to believe. It means to recognize that all truth is partial at best; there are always new meanings to be mined as our situation, lives, and experiences change. This readiness to question truth is what it means to honor not only our extraordinary human capacity to think, but also to be attentive to our embodied knowledge-- what our physical selves tell us about our lives and our reality. But beyond this, as Jacob Neusner points out, the search for what is at least partially true needs to be connected to the search for a meaningful and moral way of life. And it is always about questioning and challenging those ‘truths’ that are dangerously deceptive or misleading to our lives and the lives of others (one only has to think today about the deniers of global climate change acting out of their own selfish interests to put the future of the only planet we have at great risk; or the accusations that women ‘invite’ sexual assault; or that immigrants take away ‘our’ jobs; or that poverty is the fault and responsibility of the poor ). Put another way, the development of our critical intelligence is not about solving riddles or memorizing for a test, but creating or recreating a community’s cultural practices in the face of all those things that are destructive, damaging or dehumanizing. In the words of Jewish scholar Judith Plaskow we are always “standing at Sinai”. Far from being revealed all at once, our knowledge is always in

process, and meanings are not fixed but fluid, just as our identities are. All of this requires that we can be, at once accepting of the uncertainty of our always unfinished understanding, while restlessly committed to putting what we know to work to make a better world.

Nothing makes this approach to truth and understanding clearer than that most wonderful of Jewish holiday, *Pesach* or Passover. Of all my childhood Jewish experiences it is this holiday that was the most enjoyable and memorable for me. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, however makes this very serious point about it:

“We take a memory of 400 years of slavery and set it in a larger context of liberation and redemption. We then celebrate that slavery and add the admonition to be ever mindful of the affliction of others...Through our dynamic search for meaning the past remains eternally fluid and relevant before our eyes.”

In other words, the *seder* becomes much more than a retelling of a long ago historical events. Its purpose is clearly to interrogate our present world to find in it current forms of slavery and suffering, but to do that from the vantage point of hope and possibility. About a world in which exile and injustice have ended. The injunction to *zachor*, to remember is an ethical and transformative one. “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”. The extraordinary pedagogy of the *seder* manages to fuse a celebration of survival, the demand to see the oppressions of our present world, *and* the imaginary re-envisioning of a world of wholeness and justice. In all of this there is our own personal and collective responsibility for social change. And most of all there is the emphasis on possibility and hope. Remembering the past is the way to infuse our present with energy, passion, and imagination as to the continuing opportunity to transform the future world. This is the lesson that is the very opposite of the cynicism and despair that afflicts so many today. It is the antithesis of why bother (or, as you may remember, what was written on that famous coat, “I don’t care, do U?”). Instead there is the fierce assertion that the realities of a world that seems so unalterable can indeed crumble and change, and we can be agents of

transformation. We do not have to see ourselves as stuck in a groove and being no more than what Pink Floyd called in one of their songs being nothing but a “brick in the wall”

Finally there is Shabbat. I grew up in an orthodox Jewish home and Shabbat for me as a child was all about restrictions—things I couldn’t do on that day. Many years later I came across that wonderful little book by Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Sabbath” and a whole new light was shed on the purpose of that day. From that book I began to see the importance of time devoted to the preciousness of life and the celebration of the simple fact of being. Such a time would allow us respite from the constant imperative to work and to produce and the world of constant distractions and demands on us made so much more powerful with our 24/7 never sleeping technology. Drawing on Heschel, Letty Pogrebin expressed the notion of the Shabbat in these words:

“ The Sabbath is pure time. Their significance and beauty do not depend on any work, profit or progress we may achieve. On this one day we are supposed not to work but to contemplate creation, the product of God’s labor...Rather than communicate through productivity we are to communicate through inaction.”

Perhaps all this can be summed up in that well known Buddhist quip—“ don’t just do something, sit there!”

Shabbat represents then a temporal space—for stillness, reflection, appreciation of relationships and most of all, time to appreciate the deep mystery of creation, of life. It offers us a short period that provides a contrast to our production-driven culture’s notion of time with its demand for a frantic way of life in which ‘doing’ is everything and ‘being’ is regarded as having little useful value. The ‘doing’ culture is one in which our instrumental view of the world with its emphasis on work, spend and consume means that we live always in anticipation of our future achievements, rather than allowing ourselves to be fully present to the moment of our existence. A disease we all suffer from.

We live at a time of unparalleled destructiveness towards the earth, pollution of our air, soil and waters with potentially cataclysmic alterations in our climate. We are in desperate need of a change in consciousness that will allow us to see nature as something other than a limitless source of resources that can endlessly feed our system of production and profit. We desperately need the Shabbat consciousness of stillness, reflection and appreciation for what is, that will lead us to care for the sacred and precious beauty of creation. To reflect on what is to see ourselves embedded in the chain of existence that links us through time and to appreciate the extraordinary webs of life that nourish and support our existence. And it is to see how each seemingly distinct individual has his or her origins in the same star dust from which we are all materialized.

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Wow—our moral, social and spiritual transformation is no small project! And in these times it certainly seems far from where we are right now. To return to Rabbi Held he notes that today's *parsha* offers no promise that we can expect such an ethical and social project to be completed in our own time. In his commentary Held quotes Dr. King's famous statement shortly before his death with its echoes of Moses' at Mt. Nebo before he dies: "I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land" Rabbi Held continues that we do not need to be world historical leaders to take this lesson to heart. For all of us, to live with God is to plant seeds in the hopes that they will flourish—whether in our lifetime or long after. He makes the point that we do not live in community only with those who are alive with us in the present-- we also live in deep relationship with those who came before us, and with those who will come after. To work for a world of social justice, and human dignity for all is, I believe, the way to honor both our Jewish past, and the progressive Jewish vision of moral and spiritual healing of our nation and our planet. And if not now when?!

Finally let me quote from the words of Representative John Lewis, a hero of the struggle for racial equality and social justice in the United States:

**“The struggles of humanity will not be corrected in a day, a week , a year or even a generation. Those of us who are active participants in the struggle must recognize we are part of a long line of activists who have come before. Each individual participates in this conflict whether he or she is actively or passively engaged. The divine spark that is in each of us challenges us to be the light and stand up for what is right. We can decide whether to obey the call of the spirit or abide in denial, confusion or hostility to the truth. But once we have heard the voice calling us to act I believe we can no longer remain silent.”**