

Yom Kippur d'var Kol Nidre 2017:

The great American rabbi and former mentor of mine, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, enjoys telling a light-hearted story of how he began advocating for religious pluralism many years ago at an orthodox rabbinical conference. He made a presentation during which he remarked that it doesn't matter what kind of Jew you are – Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform – so long as you're ashamed of it. One of the rabbis in the audience, disconcerted by this remark, objected, saying, "If that's how you truly feel, that it doesn't matter, why are you still Orthodox?" Rabbi Greenberg, replied, "I guess it's the one I'm the most ashamed of."

I think this story lends itself to talking about pluralism in other contexts. Tonight, I want to invite us to think about applying Rabbi Greenberg's insight, not to internecine Jewish conflict, but to the partisan political climate now rife in our country.

I'm not going to get into the political consequences of untrammelled partisanship. I'll leave that up to the politicians, pundits and academics. As a rabbi, I'm concerned with how partisanship poisons relationships, overwhelms us with despair, and causes much gnashing of teeth.

First, a word about the Rabbi Greenberg story: What does it mean? Why does Rabbi Greenberg use such a strong term as "ashamed"? Rabbis tend to care deeply about their religious commitments. They are rabbis, after all. They want to feel proud of the movements which educated and ordained them. Rabbi Greenberg understands this. Ideally, we would be unified and wouldn't feel the need to divide ourselves up into rival groups. His concern is that movement loyalty easily leads to denigrating others and the failure to see where one's own might improve. By encouraging us to be "ashamed" of the movement we are affiliated with, Rabbi Greenberg hopes to inspire us to take a clear-eyed look at our own shortcomings, and not be so quick to judge and dismiss others. If we all focus on what's wrong with ourselves instead of what's wrong with the other guy, we will all be better off. That is a deeply Jewish message. I believe it is also the central message of the High Holydays.

Imagine, for a moment, if it didn't matter whether you were a Republican or Democrat; so long as you were ashamed of it.

I admit feeling "ashamed" of one's religious or political identity may be a bit much. If it helps, I think we can amend the rabbi's lesson to asking ourselves to feel "humility" about our movement or party instead. "Humility" implies that, though we remain resolute in our chosen pathways, we openly admit this doesn't mean we have all the answers or that we don't need input from outsiders. Not having a monopoly on the right answers and inviting outsider perspectives means that another group may have helpful

insights or better solutions for particular problems. Maybe we *all* gain instead of some gain while others are left out or left behind.

The partisan view is zero-sum. For them, one group's ascendance can only come at another group's decline. Partisans simultaneously set their sights too high and too low. They want to be the winners, yet they settle. They settle for *merely* winning instead of a *win-win* through acceptance that those on the other side are never hopeless, no matter how aggravating or infuriating we find them to be.

There is a story in the Talmud about this. There were once some *biryonim* in the neighborhood of R. Meir who caused him much *tsuris*. We can't be entirely sure as to what "*biryonim*" refers to, but it is likely they were violent pro-Roman activists in the Land of Israel in Rabbi Meir's day. R. Meir prayed for them; that they should die. His wife Beruria challenged him: "What [justifies your prayer]?" He answered, "It is written, 'Let sinners cease!'" She replied to him: It is written not 'sinners,' but 'sins'! Instead of praying that they die, pray for them that they repent, and in this way evil would cease." Rabbi Meir did pray for them, and they repented. (Ber. 10a on Psalm 104:30)

The Roman occupation of Israel was devastating. It was unrelenting and without moral justification. Rabbi Meir and his colleagues felt under siege religiously, politically and culturally. Ancient Romans and their allies were worse than rural white Christians. They were worse than coastal urban elites. They were worse than whichever side of the political divide you happen to think is beyond redemption. Why should Rabbi Meir suffer those who supported Roman hegemony? Why not wish for their deaths?

Beruria is intentionally reading the Biblical verse about sinners against its plain meaning. By deliberately pushing the boundaries of interpretation, she is coaxing a higher meaning out of the verse. She is *subverting* the text in order to *redeem* the text.

Beruria deploys the text in a manner which fundamentally challenges and alters the principles by which sin is to be dealt with. We know well what happens to sinners in the Bible. The earth swallows them whole. Horrible plagues rain down upon their countries. Their crops die and they suffer famines and droughts. Miscreants are afflicted with boils and leprosy. Praying that they die wouldn't seem to be a problem.

Beruria is setting all of this aside and taking a fresh view of sin and how to best thwart it. She is insistent that her husband look not only at his enemies, but also at himself, and to realize that he is not without the power to separate the sin from the sinner. In so doing, she is teaching a radically new perspective on what it means to be human. The act of committing sin does not create an indelible identity of "sinner." Indeed, there is no identity of "sinner" as such. There may be beliefs and commitments which we find reprehensible, but that does not grant license to demonize those who hold them. Adopting this perspective requires a modicum of humility. There's a measure of shame

in praying for death where repentance is conceivable. That is why her husband, the respected Talmudic sage Rabbi Meir, consents to change his prayer.

Recognizing the inherent individuality of every human being means resisting the urge to merge that individual's identity with that of a group he or she may be associated with. The implication is that we have *identities*, as opposed to *an* identity. Human beings are tribal, and political expression provides an outlet for tribal identification. But so do a host of other social markers such as sports, schools, neighborhoods, and professions. A person could identify as say, Asian-American. That same person could also be a medical doctor. She could also be a buckeye fan. These identities can recede or advance, depending upon who is doing the identifying. Which of these identities is germane depends upon context and should be guided by the sensibility of the person herself. The point is that we do not have a single identity, but multiple identities. Which one is the most important; the most fundamental?

*The Torah view is that our most fundamental identity is "human being."* The first human, Adam, was created from dust from all parts of the earth, so that no one land could claim him as theirs. All humanity is said to have descended from the first couple, so that no one can say to his fellow, my ancestry (or ethnicity) is greater than yours. This implied conception of identity compels us to admit that all humanity is *betzelom elokim*, made in the image of God. Jewish wisdom notes that we can create many coins from one stamp, and impressively, all are *exactly alike*. God created a single stamp of Adam & Eve and was able to produce endless copies, and miraculously *none* are exactly alike.

Because we must admit that all human beings, even the deplorables, snowflakes, and Romans who vexed Rabbi Meir are made in the Divine Image, we must conclude that they are not irredeemable. Admitting so does not absolve us of the right and responsibility to protest emphatically ideas and policies with which we cannot agree. But there is an additional thing that we must do. Rabbi Meir prayed that his opponents do *t'shuvah*; that they repent of their ill-considered, destructive ways. What is this prayer?

Since we are all created in the image of God, each of us has the right and responsibility to cultivate that Divine spark and bring its potential to its fulfillment. Our true identity is "human being." All of our other identities are really sub-identities and are fluid. They can be brought to the forefront or placed on the back-burner. We must follow our conscience and we must pursue justice. Taking sides is inevitable; it is only human. Let us take them not self-righteously, but self-reflectively. Let us commit to principles above partisanship. When we feel compelled to take a stand, let's make it about the issues and not the persons. When we rally for a party or a candidate, let's show a little humility. Maybe, sometimes, we could even be a tiny bit ashamed of it.