

Living in Two Worlds

Rosh Hashanah 2019/5779

Rabbi Daniel Greyber

My sophomore year of college was hard. A few weeks into the start of swim season, I didn't like the team. I didn't like the practices. The joy of the sport was gone. Even though it was the main reason I chose to go to Cal Berkeley, I climbed out of the pool and quit the team. The coach didn't seem to care that I did - he didn't try to talk me out of it – a fact that just confirmed my decision. I would eventually transfer to Northwestern and start swimming again my Junior year but I didn't know that then, so for the next few months on campus, I felt pretty lost. I was 3,000 miles away from my parents, from my childhood home, from my friends, and I wasn't doing the sport that had given me my identity since I was six years old.

I decided to take advantage of what the university had to offer even if it was a different sort of college experience than the one I'd hoped for. So I enrolled in a writing class in the Department of English with Professor Charles Muscatine, a kind older man who shared bottles of his home-made wine with his underage college students, something I don't think would fly on today's college campuses. As part of the class, he required us to interview and then write something about our fellow students. Tania Nochisaki and I wrote about each other and when we shared our results the following class, what she wrote was such an extraordinary gift that I kept it all these years and, a few months ago, I fished it out of some files in one of those boxes we all keep at home, filled with memories. Here's a snippet of what she wrote:

“As we were walking back to his scooter after the interview, a friend of mine yelled hello to me in passing. The next day this friend asked me who the jock frat boy was with whom he saw me. I just shook my head. Here was the dark spot. Daniel had told me the night before that he hated to be misjudged; that people often assumed that because he was an athlete, he was unintelligent and superficial. Daniel is neither of those things; and anyone who took a ride on his scooter would be able to see that.”

With these words, Tania gifted me the blessing of feeling seen and understood beyond a simple stereotype. It's such a basic human need we all have, to feel known not as a figment of someone else's imagination but in our uniqueness and individuality. It's something we need more desperately as this year comes to a close and a new year begins.

I heard a wonderful concert this summer at the Hartman Institute with Hanan Ben Ari, an Israeli singer who crosses over between the religious world in which he grew up and whose music is popular with general Israeli society. In his song, Wikipedia which I sent out to you before the holidays (I hope you had a chance to listen and that you liked it), he sarcastically sings, We don't let reality stop us from seeing [and then he lists lots of stereotypes in Israel] That every leftist is a traitor, every Arab is a suicide bomber, Every Haredi is a thief and all the settlers killed Rabin, [then he pleads] Don't lock me in any cage, Don't summarize me on Wikipedia. It's been a year in which, more and more, others have tried “to summarize Jews on Wikipedia,” in which it's become harder and harder for us to feel known and understood by others, and even to ourselves. One reason for that may be what the singer Ben Ari is singing about: we are living in an instant culture that jumps to conclusions, where people have hundreds of “friends” on-line but fewer and fewer people who we spend time with and know intimately, in which we furiously post and tag but seldom look into another's eyes and listen to their stories.

In her TED Talk, The Dangers of a Single Story, Nigerian author, Chimamanda Adichie tells about how her college roommate assumed that since she was from Nigeria, she listened to tribal music and didn't know how to use a stove! How her roommate felt sorry for me even before she saw me.

Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning, pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa. A single story of catastrophe. In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her, in any way. No possibility of feelings more complex than pity. No possibility of a connection as human equals.

In our society, we are far too good at stereotyping each other, at labelling each other, at putting each other in boxes without really getting to know people in all their complexity. We are skilled single storytellers – but those single stories are having a catastrophic effect on our politics, on our culture, on our communities. Beth El must be a haven from this culture, a beacon of counter-cultural resistance. If we cannot be a community where each one of us can feel truly known and understood in the fullness of our uniqueness, we should pack up and go home for we have missed entirely the meaning and possibility of what it means to be a religious and Jewish community.

According to some of our sources, today is not the birthday of the world – that was actually six days ago; according to these sources, Rosh HaShanah celebrates not the birthday of the world but the birth of the first human being. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5) teaches, “humans stamp many coins with one seal and they are all like one another, but the Holy One of Blessing stamped every human being with the seal of Adam HaRishon, the first human being, yet not one of them are like another.” To see another human being in their uniqueness is to bear witness to God’s greatness. To view someone as a stereotype or a category is to diminish not only the person themselves but the image of God in which they were created.

We are swimming against the tide; we are part of an American culture (and perhaps more malevolent outside forces) that push us to judge and hate one another. We must fight against that tide. It is also true that we Jews are complicated. We don’t fit neatly into boxes and it is that complexity that I want to spend some time unpacking this High Holidays.

NY Times columnist Mati Friedman put out a book this year called Spies of No Country about a group of Jews from Arab countries who served as Israel’s earliest spies because they didn’t have to learn how to fit into Arab society because their families had been in places such as Aleppo and Baghdad for thousands of years. He writes about how “double-identity has always been part of life for Jews.” Esther had a Hebrew name – but hid her Jewish identity until the right moment and used her beauty to foil a genocide. Joseph had an Egyptian name - Zofat-Paaneah – and became Egyptian so thoroughly that his own brothers didn’t recognize him years later when they came to Egypt for food. Moses was raised in the Egyptian palace but goes out to his people, leads them to freedom and leaves Pharaoh’s kingdom destroyed.

I want to note: the fact that double-identity has been part of Jewish life has been a source of anti-Semitic tropes about dual loyalties, tropes that have no place in public discourse and must be fought on the left and the right. With that said, since the very beginning of Judaism, to be of two worlds has been a defining feature of Jewish identity. Our story begins when God tells Abraham, “Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” God tells him this because the task that God has in mind for Abraham and Sarah requires that they be different from their surrounding society. “You can’t blend in,” God is saying. “You must go! You must be a stranger and leave behind all that you know; I need you to be alone, if you are to achieve the greatness I have in store for you.” But the story continues: “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” God says you can’t be of the world that you came from but, when you get to that new world, your task isn’t just to be alone; it is to be of service to the larger world. You are to create a new people, a

people that the prophet Bilaam later in the bible famously describes as “Am levadad yishkon” / “a people who dwells apart,” but a people in service of other peoples, a blessing.

It is still the case that to be a Jew is to live in two worlds. Perhaps no image demonstrates this for the American Jewish community as clearly as the front page of the Pittsburgh Post Gazette days after the terrible massacre last November at the Tree of Life synagogue. We should not take for granted what an extraordinary image this is: an American newspaper puts Hebrew letters of a Jewish prayer that its non-Jewish readers do not understand on its front page. The message is: you are one of us. We are mourning with you. It is an image that says: American Jews have arrived. We have succeeded, are integrated; we have been accepted and are beloved by our fellow Americans as Jews. AND, that image comes in the wake of a moment of excruciating Jewish vulnerability, in the wake of someone walking into a synagogue and shooting Jews because they were Jews. Friends, we live in two worlds. We are accepted and powerful; and we are fragile and vulnerable. This year, we celebrate our High Holidays in a beautiful new building that cost \$6M to renovate. We number 400 member families and downstairs is full of young parents and children. We are strong, and growing! AND, our campus is now equipped with 18 security cameras. AND outside, there are uniformed police officers to keep us safe. We are vulnerable and our vulnerability is not imagined or hysterical; it is real. People who are truly our friends must acknowledge not only our strength, but our vulnerability too.

We feel misunderstood not only by others who stereotype us; it is confusing how to understand ourselves as American Jews. One question many Jews are asking themselves is, “Are we white?” In her landmark 1998 book, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Tells Us About Race in America*, Professor Karen Brodtkin describes how Jews’ and other white ethnics’ upward mobility was the result of the GI Bill and FHA and VA mortgages that allowed us to float on a rising economic tide but to African Americans, the government offered the cement boots of segregation, redlining, urban renewal, and discrimination. Those racially skewed gains have been passed across the generations...

Not all Jews are wealthy and well-educated. Our local JFS and JFS agencies all over the country care for Jews in need who suffer from poverty and hunger, but as a community American Jews are, and are understood, as white, not genetically, but the way in which race is culturally and socially constructed. Most of us who look white are beneficiaries of white privilege and it is important for us to reflect on and understand how it impacts our lives and those around us.

Before moving on, let me pause and clarify something further: Jews are not racially white. We are not racially anything uniform. That people – Jewish and non-Jewish – think so is another single story with catastrophic consequences. There are many Jews of color in our congregation and in the American Jewish community – African American Jews, Sephardic Jews, Syrian Jews, North African Jews, bi-racial Jews – their story is too seldom told and too often trampled upon in ways big and small, such as when someone says casually or even jokingly: “You don’t look Jewish.” It is true that Judaism is passed on biologically – a child born to a Jewish mother is Jewish – but it is not passed on exclusively so. Anyone can choose to be Jewish and every moment people do is an eternal blessing. My work with Jews-by-choice is some of the most rewarding work of my rabbinate and Jews-by-choice are amongst the most committed and active members of our community. If we think Jews “look” a certain way, we betray our own ignorance and we diminish Torah and the divine image of God.

Some Jews were pushed away because they were gay or different; or less subtly because they didn’t have the privilege of a strong Jewish upbringing – I’m proud of the strides we’ve made at Beth El of becoming more welcoming and more accessible to everyone looking to connect to Jewish life.

But when Judaism is passed on biologically only, when we don't choose Judaism by actively participating in Jewish communal life through study and observance, those Jews continue to be Jews but Jewish identity weakens and the covenant between God and the Jewish people becomes a shell of its former self. Perhaps worst of all, when biology is emphasized over deed, when we say Jews "look a certain way," a soft or hard racism is given license in our communal culture that is nothing less than a desecration of God's name.

That Jews in America are largely understood as culturally white has meant that many liberal Jews have been told that they don't belong as full allies in intersectional spaces. Jews at the women's march and the Dyke March have been told that they have no right to march with a Star of David, a symbol that is not only on the flag of Israel but is a historically Jewish symbol. Jewish students on campus who are Zionists or who are perceived as Zionists have been told they have no place because they are part of white hegemonic power structures and are powerful, not vulnerable. Israel, as the only Jewish nation-state in the world, also lives in two worlds; is both strong and vulnerable. Israel is seen by some as a "white country," because Britain was a European colonizer and was the last controlling power in pre-state Palestine before the United Nations vote created Israel in 1947; some see Israel this way because she is stronger militarily than perhaps at any time in its short history and because Israel exercises military control over the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and maintains a naval blockade against Hamas in Gaza. Israel is seen by many as "white" also because political and cultural discrimination exists in Israeli society: against Israeli Arabs, against Ethiopians and against Edot Hamizrach, Jewish communities from the Arab and Islamic world that white European Zionists condescendingly lumped together with a decidedly western bias into a term meaning: "Jews from communities of the east."

But telling only one story about Israel, labeling Israel a white, colonizing European project is a characterization that erases the indigenous history of half of the Jewish population of Israel who have roots in the Islamic/Arab world; it is a story that erases the history of Ethiopian Jews who yearned and prayed to return to Israel and whose ingathering to the Jewish people after thousands of years of separation from rabbinic Judaism is one of Israel's most inspiring and extraordinary stories. Labeling Israel "white" erases Arab Christians, Arab Muslims, Druze and other minorities who constitute 20% of Israel's population who see themselves as Israeli and who have risen to become the head of Israel's supreme court, the head of Israel's largest bank, and who constitute a significant portion of Israel's medical community as doctors, nurses, pharmacists and researchers. Labeling Israel as "white" erases the indigenous history of Jews not only in the Middle East in places like Aleppo – where, for example, the Jewish community existed for hundreds of years before its 7th century Muslim/Arab conquest; it erases the continuous history of Jews living in the land of Israel from the time of the bible until present day. Yossi Klein Halevi has written about how Zionism is not a single story – it is two stories: "the meeting point between need and longing.

The Zionism of need," he writes, "is a story we all told very well...of pogroms, Dreyfus, the Holocaust," but we forget about what he calls the "Zionism of longing" — the half-forgotten story of how we managed to preserve the centrality of the land of Israel in Jewish consciousness, in every corner of the globe where Jews lived for thousands of years. By continuing to tell a Eurocentric Zionist story," writes Halevi" Israel [is misunderstood] as a European colonialist project. We need to learn and remember and re-tell the story of our indigeness, including our eastern-ness..about the 2,000-year story of yearning" to return to the place we've always called home.

Labeling Israel a "white" country erases Jewish vulnerability. It ignores the 140,000 rockets on Israel's northern border controlled by Iran's proxy, Hezbollah in violation of United Nations resolutions. It ignores Iran's stated desires to annihilate Israel with nuclear weapons. It ignores Hamas' continuing stated aim to murder Jews not only in Israel but around the world, to destroy

Israel and its cynical continuing use of funds that could build hospitals and schools but instead build elaborate underground tunnels whose sole purpose is the killing of innocents. It erases Hamas' responsibility for acquiring rockets and missiles that have terrorized a generation of Israeli children who wet their beds as teenagers and adults suffering from PTSD after living in fear of the next siren, constantly needing to know how to get to the nearest bomb shelter.

In his book, *The Cheese and the Worms* the anthropologist Carlo Ginsberg tells the story about a medieval peasant who milled grain for the king. The miller works in the palace and, because he does, he has access to the king and the royal court but, of course, he doesn't truly belong there. He is never accepted as royalty and his presence there is predicated upon what he can do for the royalty; he works in the palace but does not belong. And when he returns home from work, his fellow peasants look at him and say, "look who thinks he's special. He works for the king now." So he doesn't belong in the market either. He has access to both worlds but is at home in neither. He is alone. עם לבדד ישכון This is the Jewish experience. We enjoy the benefits of white privilege, benefits given to those of us whose skin color is white. We are not afraid of the police the way African Americans are; we live here in Durham in a city that was formed by redlining practices and, in a part of the country that was built upon the backs of black slaves brought here against their will and treated with savage brutality. And yet, antisemitism is real, it persists; we are killed for being Jews in 21st century America.

Living in two worlds is lonely. Having access to many places but being nowhere at home is a difficult burden to bear. But it is also a blessing. Look at your cards – "go forth" God says to Abraham. Leave what's familiar; I need you to be a stranger – those dots are not an easy path, but they have a purpose. "Be a blessing," God tells Abraham. God's words are not a promise. They are a challenge to responsibility.

How do we be a blessing? First, we must use our privilege and power to advocate on behalf of those without. 36 times the Torah admonishes us not to afflict the stranger, the refugee, the most powerless in society "ki gerim hayitem b'ereetz mitzrayim" because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Our deepest memory is having suffered and, if we have access to privilege and power, we must use it to speak on behalf of those who do not.

But we can't be a blessing by sacrificing our identity, by blending in and forgetting our Jewishness, or by ignoring our own vulnerability both here in the United States and that of the State of Israel. The threats of antisemitism and terrorism and a violent, turbulent Middle East that surround the Jewish state are real and we must demand from our friends and public officials that they see and acknowledge all of us, that they hear many stories not just one; we must tell them, "Don't lock me in a cage; don't summarize me on Wikipedia."

How can we be a blessing here at Beth El? Get to know someone new. Better yet, someone you think you'll disagree with! Share your story with them and be curious and ask to hear theirs. When you see that we are convening conversations around challenging topics, please come. Or take a class and listen well to your classmates. Or just sit at Kiddush after services, or invite someone for Shabbat dinner. Our community should be a place where we are curious, not judgmental, and through our curiosity, where we can feel truly known give that gift to others.

Beth El must also be a blessing to others How can you help us? Be part of our interfaith programming - host someone from TAPC or the River Church in your home; join our text learning with a local mosque; talk with Leslie Winner and Jerry Postema about joining me and Reverend Katie Crowe on an interfaith trip to Israel next July and August; or closer to home, speak with Rachel Bearman who is working with a representative of the River Church for our communities to travel

together to Washington DC and to spend one afternoon next May visiting the U.S. Holocaust Memorial and the next morning visiting the African American History Museum. It's going to be an amazing trip, an amazing changes for others to learn deeply about the experience of our neighbors in Durham and for us to share our story too.

I thought a lot about my talk today. There are many reasons why I chose to share all this with you but the truth is, I think needed to talk about this because I too want to be understood and seen and known – and I feel alone sometimes. As a rabbi, I live in (at least) two worlds: I live in the American Jewish community where I was born and to which I've committed my professional and religious life. I live with you and I love and care about you and this community very very much. And, לבי במזרח, my heart is in the East, In Israel, with the State of Israel, where I first experienced the richness of Jewish life, a place to which I return so often for soul sustenance and where I have so many friends and family who I also love very much. I live between two more worlds: I love Judaism. I love Torah and tefillah and God and our tradition. I live in the sanctuary of religion which stands outside of time and speaks the language of eternity. But I also live in a world on fire, a world with a raging political culture in and through which we fight for what is right and against hunger and racism and injustice.

As I stand before you this Rosh Hashanah, I feel stretched, spread thin like butter on a piece of bread, worried that the center won't hold, that the stereotypes we hurl at each other are destroying the American community, are breaking the bonds of the American Jewish community, and that the American Jewish community and Israel are walking away from each other. I worry our own congregation is losing our capacity to speak with and love one another, that we are losing our ability to hear and hold many stories at once and to see and love the fullness of each person in our synagogue. I don't want that to happen. With every breath I take, I'll work to keep us together. In his closing remarks to a group of several hundred rabbis this summer at the Hartman Institute, the President of the Hartman Institute North America, Yehuda Kurtzer, encouraged us to create "a mass movement of nuance and subtlety." It is a movement desperately needed in today's world; it is an important vision for Beth El. Can we see and talk with each other with nuance and subtlety? Can we bear witness to one another, and ask others to bear witness to our fullest selves? Can we hear not a single story, but many stories? Then, and only then, the day of redemption will come when each person will receive the blessing Tania gave me so long ago, of feeling known and understood not as a stereotype but in the fullness of my deepest self – on that day, when we do that for each other, the words of the liturgy will be fulfilled, "v'yeiasu kulam aguda ahat la'asot r'tzoncha b'levav shalem," we shall all be bound together, doing God's will with a full heart," kein yehi ratzon – let it be so, and let us say, Amen.