

RABBI'S MESSAGE

PREPARING FOR A NEW YEAR:

WHAT Kind of Jew or HOW Kind a Jew?

Throughout the years, leading to modern times, we have experienced varying degrees of anti-Semitism. Even in America, our parents' generation saw signs that said "No Blacks, No Jews, No Dogs, No Irish." I did not see such blatant signs when I grew up in the U.S., though I know some of these attitudes still exist.

We know there are still some who categorize all Jews as a hated enemy; but we must acknowledge that much has improved. Still, we cannot be embraced and welcomed by others until we love ourselves. As the Torah states, "love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18). Within the Jewish community, we see a variety of acceptance for *K'lal Yisrael* (the community of Israel) coupled with lack of tolerance by some. The potential to paint everyone with the same brush can come from anywhere. Some non-Jewish people who don't know any Jews choose their judgments from popular stereotypes. But our own Jewish community can also be either harsh or kind toward members whose philosophy differs from theirs. The modern world gives us many examples of both. We've seen rocks thrown at cars on Shabbat. We've seen women arrested at the Western Wall for praying on the women's side of the wall with a *tallit*. When Reform Judaism started, *kippot* were not permitted in sanctuaries and the leaders intentionally served pork and shellfish at meetings to demonstrate their philosophical difference from traditional Jews. There were Orthodox and Reform synagogues that both opposed the establishment of the State of Israel, for very different reasons.

Today, different spectrums of Judaism sometimes unite philosophies, blending traditional practices with modern sensibilities. There is an Orthodox synagogue in Jerusalem, *Shir Hadash*, which includes leadership participation for women. Four Jewish women have now been officially ordained as clergy within an Orthodox community in New York. Here in Houston, there are countless examples that show different corners of the Jewish community are accepting of each other. The ERJCC leads a pluralistic adult education program (Melton) that includes instructors from Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Pluralistic and unaffiliated institutions. The *mikvah* at United Orthodox Synagogues is, and always will be, a community *mikvah* for any Jew who wants to convert with any rabbi. Organizations led by Orthodox rabbis, like Chabad and TORCH, bring Jewish learning to the whole community. Chabad also is a leader in outreach work to the mentally challenged and those incarcerated, remembering the Lubavitcher Rebbe's charge, "No Jew left behind."

A story is told about two religiously observant Jews traveling together who came to a stream. Crossing on foot was not a problem for these two men, but a woman was standing by the bank with a frightened look on her face. The Jewish men looked at each other, as each knew that his strict observance prohibited him from touching a woman who was not his wife. Despite this, one of the men picked up the woman, carried her across the stream, and gently put her down. The other man was appalled and couldn't even look at his friend. They continued their walk in silence for over an hour, until he could no longer hold back his words. "How could you do that?" he demanded. "How could you violate the rule so blatantly?" His friend calmly responded, "I carried her for a short time, traveling a short distance. You have been holding onto her ever since. Isn't it time to let her go?"

The New Year is a great time to look at things from a new direction. As we learn from each other, we can embrace the opportunity to choose what to hold onto and what to let go.

L'shalom,
Dan Gordon