

Blending the Separation

A Rosh Hashana Sermon

by Rabbi Dan Gordon

Saturday morning

September 16, 2023 - 1 Tishrei, 5784

Whenever I go to Israel I try to get better at my conversational Hebrew. After all these years reading Torah, my Biblical Hebrew has gotten much better. But with my conversational Hebrew, I sometimes don't know where I'm going, and I need more direction. And so, unlike the stereotype of men...I ask directions! If you have been to Israel, you know that if you ever ask for directions, you're told one word: *Yashar*. *Yashar Yashar*. Straight, straight, just go straight. No matter where you are or where you're going, it's straight ahead, straight ahead...*Yashar, Yashar*. It's all straight ahead.

On one of my visits to Israel, I decided to tease my guide a little bit. You see Israelis have a have a reputation for being impatient. I don't know why - maybe it's because they never know when the next war is coming. So, I teased my guide by saying, "I finally figured out what *yashar yashar* means. It means: "go straight over there and find someone who cares... because I certainly don't have time to talk to you."

I thought it was kind of clever

My guide didn't like it.

He said, "You're absolutely wrong! Everybody thinks Israelis are impatient. We're not impatient! We are the nicest people in the world! We'll tell you anything you want to know. The only reason why we say *yashar yashar* is because once we say left or right you accuse us of being political!

The month of Elul is the month that precedes this month, Tishrei. As I've mentioned before, the letters of Elul – Aleph, Lamed, Vav, Lamed – form an acronym that stands for, “*Ani l’dodi, v’dodi li*” – I am to my beloved as my beloved is to me. One of the ways that rabbis prepare during the month of Elul as I've mentioned before is an acronym it's the month before teacher the month before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and Allah it stands for Dodi Lee I am to my beloved as my beloved is to me from the song of songs. A common teaching about that acronym is that on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, during the month of Tishrei we ask for forgiveness. During the month of Elul, the Holy One spends a month preparing to offer Divine forgiveness. For that, we say Elul is the month of love and compassion.

For rabbis those four letters – Aleph/Lamed/Vav/Lamed - could stand for “I'm Late Very Late!”

What rabbis often do during Elul is to call each other to ask, “So *nu?* How is your High Holiday preparation coming?” This year, like many years, I proudly announced late Elul, “I have not yet begun to procrastinate!” I also like to google around and see what is on the minds of other colleagues. I recently learned about a television program on the Jewish Broadcasting Station, channel 388 on Direct TV, called “A Rabbi’s Roundtable.” I have to thank Brian Eoff, who came to my house to help reconnect my cable TV just in time. I couldn’t watch it in real time because I had a board meeting, but Brian showed me how I could record it and watch it later.

The rabbi's round table featured three prominent rabbis of some of the largest and well-respected synagogues in New York, who got together for an informal chat about their personal preparations for High Holidays. One of the rabbis was Angela Buchdahl from Central synagogue who I talked about last

night. another was Chaim Steinmetz of Kehilath Jeshurun and the third was Elliot Cosgrove of Park Synagogue. Rabbi Buchdahl is a Reform rabbi, Rabbi Steinmetz is Orthodox and Rabbi Cosgrove is Conservative. The three diverse rabbis clearly respected each other. Rabbi Cosgrove shared that he felt he needed to talk about Israel, because 2023 is the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. Two of the three rabbis in that conversation were about my age. Rabbi Buchdahl was born in 1977 and so she was not around during the Yom Kippur War. Rabbi Cosgrove and Rabbi Steinmitz reminded me of how I felt as a 12-year-old. I came to Yom Kippur services that year and heard there was a war in Israel, and it wasn't going well. Certainly not as successful as The Six Day War six days earlier, in 1967. I remember a sort of melancholy in the congregation as we heard the news. Rabbi Steinmetz' synagogue was Orthodox, and though nobody had radios or televisions on, everybody knew what was happening.

It was Rabbi Cosgrove's comment really got me thinking. He said that in 1973, the threat to Israel was an external threat; other countries attacked Israel. Today, the threat is internal. While there is not a physical attack to defend, there is now an internal threat. The Great Divide between those who are on the right and those who are on the left. These groups are so far apart and seemingly not trusting one another ... kind of like the U.S where people feel so divided. As I spoke to colleagues around the country, one asked me, "what is the one pressing issue you'd like to address? This friend is an educator who is only leads services for children this year, but she said, "If I were giving a sermon in an adult congregation, here's one thing I would want to talk about.

We both paused to think about what is the most difficult issue on our minds. We both said the same word: divisiveness. That thing that separates us by ideology, by economic background, by skin color or political ideals or neighborhoods or professions or possessions or clothes or friends. There are so many things that are divided, and in both Israel and the U.S, people are divided. Instead of listening to one another, we sometimes choose to refuse to speak to those who have differing viewpoints.

Well, there is evidence that at the very beginning of the Torah, God set us up for division. The whole world was created by division and separation. God must have intended us to be separate because God created the entire world by making separations. God separated light from Darkness; God separated the water below from water from the water above; God separated animals and fish and birds.

So, with all this division and separation OF COURSE human beings would be divisive!

And yet... how separate *are* these divisions? When the full moon is visible, is it dark or light? What about dusk and dawn? Those times at sunrise and sunset when it's neither day nor night. The separation begins to blend. Nothing God created is 100% dark or 100% light.

When you walk on a beach, on very dry sand, and you approach the sea...your feet are completely dry, and then you get closer to the water and your feet are in mud...and then they are submerged. The separations are not so hard. They blend together. The extreme edges won't meet, but without the blending, none of the extremes will mean much of anything. We may stretch very far apart at the extremes, but when we blend together, those extreme viewpoints don't seem to matter.

When Rabbi Bradley Hirschfield first lived in Israel as a young man, he was very much a patriot. His philosophy at the time was 100% “this land as our land.” God has given it to us there must be no giving back of anything. Rabbi Hirshfield lived near the West Bank in one of those settlements that some call in the occupation and others call Israel proper. He was on the front lines, personally living the life of “them versus us.”

Then, he met some Palestinian neighbors. People became people; human individuals with names and spouses and children and personalities and hopes and dreams and worries. Somehow, in Rabbi Hershfield mind, they became people rather than categories. He began to realize there can be more than one viewpoint, multiple perspectives that may also have some validity, even if he disagreed. Rabbi Hirschfield wrote a book called *You Don't Have to be Wrong* for me to be Right. You almost don't have to read the book to be able to take that title phrase and think about how we listen to one another. Do we shut ourselves off to other ideas and other humans because we are sure “our way” is the only right way? Or do we try to acknowledge that there's only that there's more than one way to think about things, and even if we don't change our mind, we can listen respectfully and honor the humanity of the person who may have a different point of view.

I have a friend who is a Methodist minister who faced a conflict in her church. A monument that honored somebody from the past was smack in the middle of where younger members wanted to build a playground for the children of the church. It was the perfect spot for a playground; shade trees, soft earth, all the things that would make children feel safe and comfortable. They proposed moving the monument to a different spot. Statues don't need shade, they said. But the people who had placed the monument did not want

it moved. It had been placed in that spot with the intention of it being there in perpetuity. They were at an impasse, where both parties were certain that their view was correct.

Well, somehow or other they came up with a plan. They built the playground, but found another spot on the church's grounds. It wasn't as perfect as the first spot, but it was acceptable. It was still on the edge of where the monument had been placed, and the playground and the monument would not look good together. So, the monument was moved, but not far from its original home.

Neither party got exactly what they wanted, but it was close. The minister said to me, "I finally realized that sometimes nobody's happy unless nobody's happy." If one group gets everything they want, then someone's going to be miserable.

Of course, everyone feels that their perspective is the right one. Rarely is one party 100% right, and rarely is one party 100% wrong. This can be the year that we begin to understand that nothing is 100%. Whenever I hear someone talking about "both sides" of an issue, I want to interrupt and shout, "There's never just two sides!" There are an infinite number of sides, as each individual sees things differently. This is the world God created. There is no pure Darkness when you add even a little bit of light to produce a complete change. Just go outside in a place far from city lights when there is a full moon or stars twinkling. You'll see the light. And there is nothing that is so purely light that doesn't have some kind of a difficulty attached. Everything is a blend. All human beings have some good and some bad and some aspects that are neither good nor bad. Our communities, our nations, our families and our social groups. Everything is a blend that can be united. Everyone here has the

common denominator of being human. And everyone here is as different from every other individual in the world. Where does one stop and another begin? Today, we are going to be reading from Genesis, including the story of the creation of the world and the creation of humankind. One of our Talmudic midrashim teaches that at the beginning of time, God said, "I'm going to create the world from one man, so that nobody can ever say 'my father is greater than your father.'" According to Torah, we all started from one man: Adam. But then things got complicated in Chapter 2, when God said, "it is not good for man to be alone." So, a second person was formed. this human was called "Eve," whose Hebrew name, Chava, means life. And as it says in Torah, God created woman from the man as *ezer k'negdo*. A helper at his side, or possibly translated as "a helper against him." The Torah's story of the creation of man and woman was about a division! It was about differences; it was about being against each other! But not to be against each other in conflict; to be against each other as we lean on one another, helping each other up when we fall. We are the helpers for one another, we are all the same and we are all different at the same time. Darkness is not all dark. And when you walk on a sandy beach, the ground is dry...until it's not. Keep walking and your feet get into moist, muddy sand, and all of a sudden, you're swimming with water all around you. When we experience a moonlit night or dusk or dawn or the sand becoming the sea, we can feel this blending.

A story is told about a king who was very rich and very powerful. He taxed his citizens heavily, and very few of his citizens had enough to get by. His advisors would tell him, "your taxes are so high that your citizens are suffering." The King said I have everything I need. I'm the king this is my kingdom." One day the King decided he would like to take a boat ride with

some of his friends. He rented a boat from a local captain and a small group of those close to the king embarked on what was planned to be a very pleasant day. There was a great feast on this boat, and the King took what he wanted from the food, and gave the leftovers to his friends. The crew got the scraps of the leftovers of the leftovers. As the King was enjoying the beauty of the day, the captain of the ship went into the middle of the ship with a drill. He started to drill a hole in the middle of the ship. The King's advisors went to the king and woke him up to tell him what the captain was doing. The king went to investigate, and he saw that his advisors had told him the truth. The King demanded, "What are you doing?" "The captain said, "I'm drilling a hole in *my* ship." The king said "You can't do that," but the captain quickly responded, "Of course I can. This is my boat. You rented it for a few hours, but this is mine, I can do what I want with it. The king said, "But we'll sink, and we'll drown!" "The captain calmly told him, "No, I'm fine. We have a life preserver, one fabulous life preserver. I'm wearing it," he said with a smile. "I have everything I need."

The King said, "You fool! Don't you see we're all in the same boat?" The captain said, "It's about time we all understood that."

My friends: we all in the same boat. Regardless of our resources, our knowledge, our possessions or our profession, we're all in the same boat. We can blend our differences to make the world one. *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*. One Israel, one human family, one God and one world for all of us to share. By listening to each other and opening our hearts, together, we can make it the best world possible.

Shana Tova.