

Barriers or Bridges?

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Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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National elections define our identity as a country. They are critical times in which we determine the future direction of our nation. Though we are all aware that there is a general election taking place next month, this morning I want to focus our attention not on our country's destiny, but on our identity today as a Jewish community.

The start of a New Jewish Year is an appropriate time to consider just how we define ourselves. One way to start is by examining the issue of boundaries. Boundaries are critical for they serve the purpose of defining people into groups and generating feelings of similarity and group membership.

Our exploration of boundaries raises fundamental questions about our identity as Jews. How do we define who belongs and who does not? Are we distinct from others? To use a biblical term, are we the chosen people? And if we are, for what purpose are we chosen?

Let's begin exploring boundaries with the example of a Jewish fraternity in Ohio. AEPi, Alpha Epsilon Pi, is the most active Jewish fraternity in the world. Over 10,000 students at 188 college campuses in seven countries belong to AEPi. The fraternity's mission is explicitly not religious. According to their website, its core mission is to "provide the opportunity for a Jewish man to be able to join a Jewish organization whose purpose is social and cultural in nature.... AEPi is a Jewish fraternity, though nondiscriminatory and open to all who are willing to espouse its purpose and values."

Though it claims to be nondiscriminatory, a controversy arose recently at the chapter at Ohio State University concerning whether someone who was not Jewish could pledge to AEPi. An engineering study named Eun Bae is Korean American and not Jewish. By all accounts he is a great guy, very easy-going, fun to be with, an all-around good dude. He enjoyed participating in AEPi functions and the brothers appreciated his company. When Eun Bae expressed interest in joining AEPi, the members had no problem with him pledging. But the fraternity's national organization did.

When they found out, the national leadership made clear to the fraternity that if they admitted Eun Bae, they could face a membership review, which assuredly is not a good thing. "In the past, AEPi houses that underwent such investigations had seen their officers or even most of the rank-and-file brothers stripped of membership." (*The Forward*, September 13, 2016) In the end, Ohio State's AEPi's chapter reluctantly decided not to admit Eun Bae which bummed him out and saddened the fraternity brothers.

Was national AEPi right to draw the line, refusing to admit a non-Jew to membership? What was the possible harm in doing so? What might have been the benefit of admitting Eun Bae? Were they acting with prejudice or were they safeguarding the values that distinguish AEPi as a Jewish fraternity?

Jewish day schools face similar kinds of questions as Jewish fraternities and sororities. In the case of Orthodox Jewish Day Schools, they see it as inconsistent with their mission to admit non-Jews. They view their day schools not only as educational institutions but also as religious communities. The daily recitation of prayers and learning of sacred texts serve as distinct expressions of Jewish identity that are only incumbent upon Jews.

In contrast, there are non-Orthodox day schools that see matters quite differently. At a number of Jewish day schools in the Bay Area, they not only accept non-Jews, but they actively recruit them at school fairs. They are not motivated to do so for financial reasons. Instead, these schools see it as beneficial and enriching to have Jewish and non-Jewish students studying together. Yes, there is a standard Judaica curriculum which all are expected to learn, but a diverse student body is seen as a positive. As one head of school stated, "The educational and ethical foundations of Jewish culture are attractive to diverse families [and] there are non-Jewish students for whom this is a good fit. And it works very well for us because we are a pluralistic school that values diversity." (*J*, January 19, 2012)

So far we have looked at the examples of Jewish fraternities and day schools. Let's turn our attention to a different kind of Jewish organization, a synagogue. More specifically, here at Temple Beth Torah, how do we address issues of identity? How do we define our boundaries as a Jewish congregation?

One place to start is by looking at our Temple by-laws. Our congregation was founded in 1962. The earliest by-laws I could find are from 1966. The criteria for membership state that "Any person who is Jewish or is married to a Jew... 21 years of age or over, or the head of a

household, and of good moral character, shall be eligible for membership in the Congregation.” These qualifications: Jewish or married to a Jew, legally an adult, and of good moral character were reiterated when the by-laws were revised five years later.

These qualifications remained consistent in the by-laws of 1981, 1987, and 1989 with two notable changes. The first is that the age for membership was lowered from 21 to 18 years old. The second change in the by-laws was the deletion of the clause stipulating that to be a member of Temple Beth Torah, you had to be “of good moral character.” I don’t know why this change was made. Could it be that in the 1980’s a great number of people of questionable moral character were applying for membership? Is it conceivable that out of mercy, the congregation decided to accept them?

More seriously, I presume the clause about moral character was deleted because there is no clear definition of just what it means. Basically the term is amorphous and nonsensical and it deserved to be deleted.

Though the legal definition for membership at Temple Beth Torah has remained fairly consistent, it does not mean that on occasion, the definition has required interpretation. The by-laws clearly state that someone who is an adult and Jewish, or married to a Jew, can become a member. But who decides “Who is a Jew?” An Orthodox interpretation is straightforward: a Jew is someone who is born of a Jewish mother or who converts to Judaism according to Orthodox law. Yet we are a Reform congregation. 33 years ago our movement determined that a Jew is someone born of either a Jewish mother or a Jewish father. Furthermore, the child must be raised as a Jew; receive a Jewish education and celebrate appropriate life cycle events such as receiving a Hebrew name and becoming Bar or Bat mitzvah. In truth, Reform Judaism goes further than Orthodoxy. Jewish identity is not transmitted solely through the mother but instead is confirmed through Jewish education and practice. As for conversion, Reform Judaism warmly encourages and supports anyone who seeks to establish a Jewish identity under rabbinic guidance.

The primary definition for membership at Temple Beth Torah has been constant for decades. When the congregation was founded 55 years ago, it was highly unlikely that anyone who wasn’t Jewish would want to join the congregation unless he or she was married to a Jew. But that is no longer the case. There are people who feel very much connected to our congregation who are not Jewish and not married to a Jew. These folks come regularly to our worship services; they study in our Adult Education programs; and they volunteer to help at our fund raising events. They serve meals at the Homeless Shelter and they are ardent supporters of

Israel. Some of these wonderful people have asked whether they can become members of Temple Beth Torah. Our response, to date, is that they are welcome to be a part of our congregation; to be fellow travelers with us and to participate as much as they like. But they cannot become members.

Is this right? Should we welcome anyone who wishes to affiliate with us? If we do not, are we any different than AEPi shutting the door on Eun Bae?

Clearly Temple Beth Torah is not the same as a Jewish fraternity. We are not a secular organization, though like AEPI, we sponsor social and cultural programs. Nor are we identical to a Jewish day school. Though we highly value the education of our children, it is obviously not the sole purpose of our congregation.

Underlying the issue of membership at Temple Beth Torah are questions of how we define ourselves. Who are we? What are our core values? What should be the boundaries of who belongs and who does not? As we ponder our identity as a Reform Jewish congregation, we must also ask: Do we Jews have a unique mission to fulfill among the peoples of the earth?

These are challenging issues to consider. There is a part of us that shies away from responding to these questions because it feels like we are separating ourselves from others when we speak about a Jewish mission. Aren't Jews just like everyone else? After all, every human being is created in God's image. All human beings are unique and infinitely precious. Torah teaches that we are all descendants of one man and one woman, Adam and Eve, and hence we are all equal.

There is a universalism to Judaism that affirms that all life is sacred. Torah instructs all humanity to care for the earth, to guard our world from harm, to ensure that future generations enjoy a verdant and peaceful world.

Yet we would be denying a central tenet of Judaism if we refute God choosing the Jewish people for a special purpose. Torah teaches that God called to Abraham to separate himself from his homeland, his upbringing, and his cultural inheritance. God establishes with Abraham a *Brit*, a sacred covenant. God proclaims to Abraham that if he keeps God's ways, then his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the land of Israel will be an eternal inheritance.

This *Brit*, this covenant, was for all time. Generations later, after God freed the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, Moses and the people of Israel

assembled at Mt Sinai to receive Torah. The Torah embodies our faith, our history, and our path to follow to live a life of sacred purpose.

Receiving Torah makes the Jewish people unique among all peoples. It delineates us from others. It does not in itself make us superior to other faiths. Yet it is fair to say that over time, we established ever more strict boundaries between ourselves and others. Keeping kosher required that we could not eat in the home of a non-Jew. Keeping Shabbat meant separating ourselves from the greater society. In response to centuries of persecution, the concept of chosenness came to mean not only that Jews were different from other people, we were better than our oppressors. The word Goy is a perfectly good Hebrew word that means "nation." The prophet Isaiah proclaimed, *Lo yissa goy el goy cherev, lo yilmadu od milchama*; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

But the word "goy" as used by our ancestors in Eastern Europe took on an entirely different meaning. The word "goy" was laden with contempt. Ashkenazi Jews, living under oppression, disparaged Christians. To have a *goyishe kup*, meaning a Gentile's way of thinking or behaving, was not meant as a compliment. To utter the phrase, *Shikur iz a Goy*, implied that Gentiles lacked self-control and routinely got drunk.

Obviously, here in America in the year 2016, we do not speak of non-Jews in such negative terms. We are not threatened with overt discrimination and persecution. Non-Jews are not outsiders whom we fear while living behind ghetto walls. In our age, non-Jews are not the "other" – quite the contrary, they are our neighbors and our co-workers. More importantly, they are our family; they are our spouses and the co-parents of our children. At Temple Beth Torah, non-Jews are members of our congregation, supporting our synagogue in every meaningful way; worshipping together, celebrating Shabbat and festivals, educating our children, and giving generously of time and resources. We are one family and one congregation.

So should we still require that for someone to join our congregation he or she has to be Jewish or married to a Jew? Should we not welcome anyone who is willing to support the purpose of our congregation as stated in our by-laws? These include creating a viable Jewish community, helping individuals achieve an affirmative identification with Jewish life, providing education, and seeking to respond to Jewish concerns locally, nationally, and internationally. If someone who is not Jewish supports these aspirations, should we still restrict him or her from becoming a member of Temple Beth Torah?

From a communal standpoint, the question is worth pondering. Is membership in Temple Beth Torah equivalent to affirming the Jewish people's covenant with God, of accepting Torah and striving to live by its principles? What does it mean to belong to a Jewish religious organization whose purpose is to become a *kehilla kedusha*, a sacred community?

In our religious life, we affirm that Jews have a unique relationship to God. When we light Yuntiff candles, we say: *Asher Kidshanu Bemitzvotav V'tzivenu L'hadlik Ner Shel Yom Tov* – for you have sanctified us with your mitzvot and commanded us to light the festival lights. When a person is called up for an Aliyah, he or she recites a blessing that states, *Asher Bachar Banu MiKol Ha'amim V'natan Lanu et Torato* – for You have chosen us from among all peoples and given us Your Torah." And no prayer in our liturgy more clearly expresses the delineation of Jews as a unique people than the words we recite near the conclusion of every service at Temple Beth Torah, the Aleinu. We know the words by heart:

*Aleinu l'shabei'ach laadon hakol
Lateit g'dulah l'yotzeir b'reishit –
Shelo asanu k'goyei haaratzot
V'lo samanu k'mishp'chot haadamah;
Shelo sam chelkeinu kahem
V'goraleinu k'chol hamonam*

Let us now praise the Sovereign of the universe
And proclaim the greatness of the Creator
Who has not made us like the other goyim (nations) of the earth
And who has set us apart from the other families of the earth
Giving us a destiny unique among the nations.

This prayer affirms the particularistic nature of the Jewish people. We are not like other peoples of the earth. We are unique. We have a mission in life that is ours alone.

We are given the responsibility to follow a path of righteousness; to do justice and love mercy; to protect those who are most vulnerable in our society. Our Jewish heritage is a treasure house of wisdom that offers guidance on every aspect of life: to honor our mothers and fathers, to treat others with kindness, to value learning as a life-long endeavor. Judaism offers a sacred path of how we should eat, pray, and love. It teaches us how to align ourselves in the world through the rhythm of Shabbat and festivals. Judaism guides us how to rejoice at the birth of a child by linking a baby to a continual chain of tradition that spans millennia. Judaism

inspires us to pass on our heritage to our children and celebrate when a 13-year-old becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In Judaism, the union of two loving companions is uplifted as an act of *kiddushin*, of holiness. Judaism teaches us how to respond to the death of a loved one. Jewish practice is steeped in wisdom as it guides the mourner along the path from grief to sorrow, from sadness to grateful remembrance.

Yet, our uniqueness as Jews should not to be a barrier as to how we relate to the world. Judaism has both a particularistic as well as a universalistic dynamic. The Aleinu prayer begins with the proclamation that Jews are a unique nation but at its conclusion, the prayer widens to universal hope:

Adonai our God, we look to You
Hoping soon to see the splendor of Your power revealed...
A world in which all human beings make known Your name
While those who do evil turn toward You
V'ne'emar: V'hayah Adonai L'melech Al Kol Haaretz
As the prophet announced,
The Eternal will reign over all the earth
On that day the Eternal shall be one, and God's name shall be one.

Judaism should not lead us away from others but quite the opposite. Judaism teaches us how to unite our lives with the whole of humanity.

A few weeks ago, I was asked to be part of a panel at Washington Hospital. The panelists were religious leaders who were asked to share our respective faith's approach on the subject of Death and Dying. The panel consisted of a Catholic priest, a Christian minister, a Buddhist monk, a Muslim teacher, a Sikh as well as a Hindu leader, and myself. I listened as my fellow panelists spoke with heart and compassion about issues of life and death; how best to serve those who were facing imminent demise or who had a loved one who was dying. Surely, there were differences in our distinct faiths, but far greater was the sense of connection I felt as each of us spoke of a reverence for life.

I did not feel separate from those of other faiths. Instead, through my affirmation of my own faith, I felt a deep connection to everyone on that panel. Judaism did not separate me from others; instead my faith reinforced the sacred task that is before us each and every day. How do we see the divine spark in each human being? How do we respond to those in need? How do we sanctify life with kindness and compassion?

During this day of Rosh Hashanah and the ten days ahead, we each have challenges to address. How do we deepen our connection to Jewish values, Jewish knowledge, and Jewish practice? How do we find guidance in our prayers, engage in honest self-inquiry of our past actions, and find the courage to ask for forgiveness from those whom we have harmed? How do we make our Judaism more affirming, more joyful, and life giving? How do we deepen our connection to our congregation and through it find a deeper sense of identity and purpose?

On this day of Rosh Hashanah, O God as we affirm our special relationship to You, teach us to embrace all people as reflections of the divine. Grant us the courage to tear down the walls in our heart, seeking not to erect barriers but instead to build bridges one to another. Let us strengthen the bonds within our homes and our congregational family. Let us work together with good people of all faiths to build a kinder and gentler world. O God in this New Year, bestow upon us strength and wisdom to bring forth a world of healing and renewal, harmony and peace.

Amen.