

Shabbat Shalem 2020 D'var Tora
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Rabbi Doniel Kramer shares a story in YU's most recent *Tisha B'av To Go*. There's a wealthy Jewish man, who is also very stingy. He's visited by a needy man begging for food. The rich guy refuses to give anything to the beggar, who pleads and pleads, until finally the rich man digs into his garbage bin and pulls out a piece of old, rotten fish, which the beggar devours. Late that afternoon, the beggar gets sick and is rushed to the hospital. When the wealthy man hears that the beggar landed in the hospital, and heads right over since visiting the sick is such an important mitzvah. The next morning, he finds out that the poor man has died, and he makes sure to go to the funeral, which is also a big mitzvah. That afternoon, the wealthy man can't stop smiling, as he tells his kid that he's heading over to the shiva house, yet another mitzvah. His child asks why he's so happy, and the man tells the child, through his smile, that with just one lousy piece of fish, fish that he had thrown away, he was able to fulfill four essential mitzvot: feeding a hungry guest, visiting the sick, attending a funeral, and comforting a mourner.

When we do these mitzvot, yes, there is personal gratification, and also divine reward. However, the reason we are gratified and rewarded is not meant to be about us--it's not about me, or you, as the doer. These mitzvot are for the Other, the recipient, and when I do a mitzvah with a focus on the Other, the needs of the Other, I ensure that someone else, who is by no means less deserving than you or I, is able to have as full an experience as I am having, and I truly fulfill the mitzvah.

In this week's parsha, named for a non-Jew, Yitro suggests the creation of an alternative civil structure to help Moshe guide the people, which Moshe creates. Moshe, having been on more than one occasion "a stranger in a strange land," was perhaps more empathetic to strangers, to the Other. Despite Yitro's status as a non-Jew, a clear outsider, Moshe reveres him. We learn from this, that everyone has something valuable to offer, and that we won't serve the community by excluding based on prejudice, lack of awareness, or lack of understanding, or by maintaining a flawed status quo.

Another interesting moment in this week's sedra comes when we receive the Ten Commandments. The Third Commandment is to keep Shabbat, which is so holy and so vital that it applies without exclusion to everyone in the community: all ages, all levels of wealth and status, all people and animals, even visitors, immigrants, and non-Jews. Everyone gets a day off!

Let's take a moment to consider the phrase this Shabbos is all about: inclusion. The great thing about having an Inclusion Committee is that we are comfortable admitting that we are, by default, exclusive. Creating programs aimed at specific groups of people to try to include them does not alter the fundamental problem: that we are exclusive. What if we turn it around, reframe it? What if we strive instead to be "non-exclusive" rather than "inclusive?" Let's not make it about me or you *deciding* who to include, and how. Let's make the mitzvot about the Other, the needs of other people. We can start with a new default, where *of course* everyone *is* included, regardless of background, ability, level of knowledge or observance, family structure or identity, political or religious leanings, financial position, physical appearance, age, or sex. Indeed, when it was time for the people to meet God, the thunder and lightning and loud shofar blasts had *kol ha'am--all* the people in the camp--atremble.

Tonight kicks off Shabbat Shalem, with this wonderful family event brought to you by the shul's Inclusion and Youth Committees, as part of JDAIM, the Jewish Disabilities Awareness, Acceptance, and Inclusion Month. For the first-ever Shabbat Shalem, the Committee sent out an anonymous survey to find out what obstacles might be preventing people from participating. One woman wrote in that she hadn't been to shul in many years because she's allergic to synthetic fragrances, and the overwhelming scents made it impossible for her to join. The shul changed cleaning solutions and hand soaps to all fragrance-free options, and asked members to avoid wearing perfumes. Let's keep asking what barriers there may be, with the common assumption that we are all already included. As we design and prepare for shul activities, how often do we stop to consider our choices and how they may exclude someone else from the experience? The language we use--how we speak about those within our community *and* those from without; the way we listen, really listen, and respond; how we create our communal space and how we move in the space around others; the way we greet others--particularly those who are new to our community or to Orthodoxy in general, or those who could be marginalized or isolated; how we distribute kibudim and ritual roles; the financial cost; the snacks we bring; what we wear. The goal of the Inclusion Committee and of our annual Shabbat Shalem is to build awareness and initiate change, so that every Shabbat at AABJ&D can be a Shabbat Shalem. Let us start from a new neutral, that of inclusion, and unless there is good reason to exclude, let's make non-exclusion the goal.

Sources:

["Visiting the Sick: Restoring the Beracha of 'Hamakom' to its Proper 'Place'"](#) by Rabbi Doniel Z. Kramer, Ph.D. YUTorah.org.

[“Remove All Obstacles to Create Non-Exclusive Prayer Spaces”](#) by Rabbi Daniel Geretz.
TimesofIsrael.com.