

## OHABEI SHALOM INCLUSION SERMON, 2016

Strolling one sunny day a few months ago at the Cape, I stopped to “take in” a sign in front of a house of worship that read: *Come as you are and leave changed*. It triggered a memory of a community I knew years ago in Chile where people showed up for services literally *as they were* — wearing flip flops, shorts and a T-shirt. This community was part of a complex that included a synagogue, a swimming pool, and tennis courts. It was truly a “come as you are” sort of place. What mattered was not your *attire* but your *desire* to be there!

My mind continued to wander, to take me back in time. I was now thinking about the funny Amelia Bedelia books I used to read to my children. You know the ones where the nanny — who’s at the center of the story — is always misunderstanding instructions by taking “figures of speech” literally? For example, when told to “dress a chicken” in preparation for dinner, Amelia puts a doll’s dress on the chicken!

Once I stopped myself from reminiscing and thinking about “change” in an Amelia Bedelia sort of way, what struck me was how beautifully this message *to come as you are and leave changed* captures what we hope to achieve here, at Ohabei Shalom. We hope that each of us feels truly welcome just as we are: whether walking or in a wheelchair, whether white or black, straight or gay, whether in an interfaith relationship or not, we want everyone to feel at home. But the thing is this: at this time of year — more than at any other time — this hope that we each feel comfortable and at home just *as we are* is coupled with a desire to instill enough discomfort and restlessness to inspire us to *change* and become our best selves. This, in a nutshell, is what *teshuva* is all about.

I came across a wonderful image of what this twin challenge of *acceptance* and *change* might look like. The author and medical doctor Naomi Remen writes about a colleague of hers who envisions his life as if it were an orchestra. This colleague describes the moment before the orchestra begins playing, when the concertmaster asks the oboist to sound an ‘A’. At first there is chaos as the musicians try to align themselves with that note, but as each one moves closer to it, the chaos diminishes until there is a moment of rest, of homecoming. And then he goes on to say, “I am always tuning my orchestra. Somewhere deep inside there is a sound that is mine alone, and I struggle daily to hear it and tune my life to it.”

It’s a beautiful image, which, on the one hand, is all about *teshuva* — about listening to our own unique sound and turning towards it. And on the other hand, it’s an image of inclusion, of being attuned to something outside of ourselves that leads disparate parts towards interconnection and harmony.

Of course, this image assumes that we’re already part of that inner circle.

But that isn't the case for everyone. There are those among us who stand in the periphery, who are outside looking in, feeling marginalized from mainstream Jewish institutional life — Jews with disabilities, interfaith couples and families, LGBT Jews, multiracial Jews, and unaffiliated Jews.

This past December at the Biennial of the Reform Movement we heard from one of its leaders — a woman who self-describes as a “multiracial Jewish woman of color” — challenging us to what the Movement calls “audacious hospitality;” challenging us to ensure that those who have traditionally felt disenfranchised by the Jewish community feel welcomed in our synagogues.

The good news is that our community has been working on these issues for quite some time. In fact, in recognition of our commitment to inclusion, this past spring the Ruderman Foundation selected Ohabei Shalom as one of eight partner institutions in the Boston area. Ruderman will help us take our commitment to inclusion to the next level. And last summer, thanks to the generosity of members of our community, we were able to do significant renovations — including a ramp to the *bima* and bathrooms that are wheelchair accessible and accommodate gender preferences. In the very near future, we hope to install an elevator as well. And not only that, your contributions have also allowed us to purchase new prayer books, which use egalitarian language and are fully transliterated, making our services that much more inclusive and accessible. However, whether or not we succeed in making everyone in our community feel at home depends on *how* we put these generous gifts to use. Our success depends on interactions and relationships — on how we respond to the woman of color, or the transgender person, or the child with intellectual disabilities in our community.

I'd like to share with you two responses — two stories from the Talmud that help us think about inclusion. The first story is about the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. As you might remember, these cities have come to epitomize moral depravity and cruelty. However the Torah doesn't really tell us what they did wrong, saying only that they were really bad. The Talmud gives us a much fuller account of the wickedness that characterized these towns. Among the stories the rabbis tell is one about the “unique” hospitality of the Sodomites. Listen to this: they had guesthouses with beds of a single standard size. You might think it's not much of a problem — certainly not a big deal if you are short like me but probably a bit uncomfortable if you're really tall. But you would be wrong to think this way because when a guest came looking for lodging in Sodom, their hosts would make sure that the bed fit *just right*: if he was shorter than the bed, his host would stretch him out until he fit. And if he was too tall — you guessed it, they would chop off his feet! This gruesome picture — this way in which evil is defined, tells us just how important accommodating the needs of those who enter our homes, our spaces, is in our tradition.

And now, let me share with you a second, more nuanced story, which I learned from Professor Julia Watts Belser, who came here this past fall for a Shabbat focusing on the inclusion of people with disabilities. This story comes from the Talmud and it's about a man married to a woman whose hand was a stump. According to this tale, until the day she died, the man was unaware that his wife's hand was but a stump. How do you think the rabbis of the Talmud think about this story? Well, there are two responses, one praising his wife that says: "Come and see how modest a *woman* she was, for her husband was not aware of her stump." Meaning she was careful to hide her hand from him. But then, a dissenting opinion is offered which says: "Such was her customary way. Instead, come and see how modest a *man* this was that he was not aware of this blemish in his wife."

So, who is the hero in this tale? The wife who hid her disability from her husband or the husband who never saw it? The rabbis want us to think of this story as a sweet and loving tale with either a hero or heroine. However, Professor Belser, who is herself wheelchair bound, challenged us to think about this story differently. Speaking from her own experience, she said: "To feel included, I want others to *see* my disability. It's a core part of who I am."

This desire to be *seen* fully is the subject of one of the most popular Ted Talks. It's by Brene Brown, a professor of Social Work at the University of Houston, and it's called "The Power of Vulnerability." Maybe you've seen it — considering it has 20 million views! She begins her talk with the premise that connecting with others is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. And the secret to achieving meaningful connections, says Brown, is allowing ourselves to be fully seen, sharing those places where we feel most vulnerable. What this requires from us, as *individuals*, is that we have compassion for ourselves — that we feel worthy of love just as we are, and the courage to let ourselves be seen, deeply seen. What this requires from us as members of a *community* is that we demonstrate — in words and in deeds — our openheartedness and commitment to fully see and welcome each other as we are.

Brown's talk made me think of how we undermine this effort when — despite our best intentions — we say things like: "I don't see color, I just see people, we're all part of one race, the human race, there's no difference." We undermine the desire that we each have to be seen because peoples' visible identities are integral to their lived reality. When we "neutralize" skin color or ethnicity or gender or physical ability we ignore the way society approaches us. The best way to be inclusive is to *listen* and *honor* the life experiences and the differences that each of us brings.

This message was also at the core of what Loretta Claiborne shared with us when she came to Ohabei Shalom as one of our TOS Talks speakers this spring. Loretta is a Special Olympics athlete — a runner who has competed in 26 marathons and won more than 1,000 medals. She told us about the bullying she

faced growing up because she was black and because of her disability. But the story that has stayed with me is about the Special Olympics World Games in 1995. President Bill Clinton was invited to address the audience, and Loretta was given the special honor of introducing him. As the President spoke, a professional photographer watched a group of athletes who raised their disposable cameras in the air. (Remember, this was 1995!) Well, there was something peculiar about the way in which they went about this. These athletes were holding their cameras backwards — the lenses flush against their noses as they peered through the viewfinders. Clearly, thought the photographer, they had never used cameras before. As Clinton's voice boomed across the stadium, the photographer made his way through the crowd, intent upon ensuring that these athletes wouldn't waste their film on blurry images of their own faces. He approached them and said: "You're trying to get a picture of Clinton, right? You have to turn the camera around. Let me show you." He took one of their disposable cameras and showed them the way to point the lens towards the President. At that moment, one of the athletes said to the photographer: "Thank you sir, but may I show you something? If you turn the camera around and hold your eye up to the viewfinder and look backward, it works like a telescope, and this way you can see the President very clearly. But thank you for helping us."

It's so easy for us — even for well meaning people like the photographer in this story — to make all sorts of assumptions about people who are different from us. This is why my final remarks are in fact a request: a request to all of you to respond to a survey that our Inclusion Committee has put together. This survey is on our website and, by request, also available in hard copy. If inclusion is, at its core, about hearing and seeing one another fully, we need to make sure that each of our voices is heard!

On this Rosh Hashanah may we be attuned to the sound that is uniquely ours, may we see each other in our fullness and welcome each other *as we are*. But may this coming year also bring with it experiences that inspire us to grow and *change* — changing to become the very best versions of ourselves. Attuned to ourselves and to one another, may we find happiness and harmony in this New Year!

Shana tova u'metuka.