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Five Habits of the Heart That Make Democracy Possible

Tomorrow we will read these words from the Book of Deuteronomy: “*Atem Nitzavim hayom Culchem...* You stand together this day before God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from the woodchopper to the water drawer...”¹ The whole Israelite community was arrayed on the eastern side of the Jordan River, listening to Moses as he was preparing them to enter the land of Israel and create a new society. The Israelites know that soon they will be without Moses, who will die before they enter the land, and God will no longer tend to them as they were cared for with regular portions of manna during their forty years of wandering. The children of Israel will be forced to grow up and take responsibility for themselves and their community.

When I imagine their situation, it makes me think about the struggles we Americans are facing as a society today. Although our country is not new, we too are on the cusp of a leadership transition that has many of us scared and on edge. The two major party candidates have—by far—the lowest favorability ratings in the modern era. The din of the 24-hour news cycle combined with the unfiltered and instant stream of social media has made our election more like blood sport rather than reasoned and respectful discussion. Like the Israelites, we have no choice but to move forward and take responsibility for our community.

Sociologist Parker Palmer, who runs the Center for Courage & Renewal that focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change wrote in his recent book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*:

“If I were asked for two words to summarize the habits of the heart American citizens need in response to twenty-first-century conditions, I would choose *chutzpah* and humility. By *chutzpah*, I mean knowing that I have a voice that needs to be heard and the right to speak it. By humility, I mean accepting the fact that my truth is always partial and may not be true at all, so I need to listen with openness and respect, especially to “the other,” as much as I need to speak my own voice with clarity and conviction.”

I couldn't agree more. These are qualities that are always needed to make a democracy thrive. But in times of intense social and political divisions, these qualities are particularly key to helping us live with greater equanimity and channel our concerns about our society in productive ways. So what can we do to develop our *chutzpah* and humility?

¹ Deuteronomy 29:9-10

Parker Palmer proposes an answer with what he calls, “5 habits of the heart that make democracy possible.” In the midst of this rancorous and divisive time, Palmer’s five habits have much wisdom to offer us.

Thinking about the Israelites, Nitzavim—standing, preparing to enter the Promised Land, I summarize Parker Palmer’s principles as: Understanding, Standing out, Withstanding, Standing up, and Standing together. Let me elaborate.

1. Understanding

We have a diverse population in this country, even more than the motley crew of Israelites who stood together on the eastern shore of the Jordan River. Factory workers and lawyers, blacks and Asians, Jews and Muslims, stand shoulder to shoulder on subways, wait in line together to buy coffee, and sit next to each other in classrooms. None of us is an island unto ourselves. “Biologists, ecologists, economists, ethicists and leaders of the great wisdom traditions have all given voice to this theme. Despite our illusions of individualism and national superiority, we humans are a profoundly interconnected species—entwined with one another and with all forms of life, as the global economic and ecological crises reveal in vivid and frightening detail.”² In Judaism, this idea is reflected in the oneness of God, which means that we posit that there is a unity to all of creation. There’s nothing outside of this oneness; we are inextricably linked.

Although our country is becoming increasingly polarized—Republicans and Democrats tend to live apart from each other and don’t tend to socialize together—we are nevertheless dependent upon those who don’t think or vote like us. We must face the fact that the direction of our country and the laws that guide it are not just determined by those with similar opinions. This may be terribly hard to do when we are convinced that others are misguided or worse. It’s easy to criticize Donald Trump for his intolerance, bigotry and misogyny, but what about the millions (somewhere plus or minus 40 percent of the electorate) who support him? It is easy to caricature the most extreme elements of his supporters as ignorant, racist, or conspiracy theorists. But, we need to remember that both Trump and Clinton supporters are human beings with hopes and fears, concerned about the safety of their children, economic opportunity, and the quality of their communities. Can we hear the pain and anxieties of others who don’t think like we do? Instead of condescending or dismissing people who think differently than us, can we take their concerns seriously? There was not a halcyon time when our country was perfect, but neither are things just fine today.

Over the weekend, I attended a lecture by a professor of education at my daughter’s college. This professor is working on making science education more engaging and exciting to kids. A primary philosophy of her educational approach is “people make sense.”³ By this she means that if we try and understand where someone is coming from, we are more likely to be able to communicate with them, show empathy for them, and, in

² Parker Palmer.

³ April Luehmann, professor, Warner School of Education, University of Rochester.

her case, teach them. How might we regard each other differently if our first instinct was to think, “People make sense?” I know this is hard to do when we disagree vehemently, but when we find ourselves being judgmental, can we refrain from dismissing and demeaning one another? This question becomes all the more salient when we think about our interactions on Facebook and Twitter and under a cloak of anonymity in online comment sections!

Which leads to a second key habit of the heart...

2. Standing out

We need to develop an appreciation of the value of groups standing out one from another. Although, it is true that we are all in this together, it is equally true that we spend most of our lives in our own groups or "tribes", and we can get stuck thinking about the world in terms of "us" and "them". But "us and them" does not have to mean "us versus them." Instead, it should remind us of the imperative of building bridges with others, working to create an “us AND them.”

Abraham is considered the paradigm of welcoming strangers when he rushes to greet and welcome into his tent the wayfarers who will deliver the good news that he and Sarah will have a child. After they eat a meal and spend the night with Abraham and Sarah, these same strangers go to Sodom where they receive a very different kind of greeting. They are allowed to enter through the gate of Sodom, and are welcomed by Abraham’s nephew, Lot, but a mob surrounds Lot’s home, demanding he send the visitors out. God destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their abhorrent behavior.⁴ The cities crumble from within because of their meanness and corruption. Perhaps there’s a lesson for us here about the efficacy of building walls! It didn’t help Sodom. Building bridges, on the other hand, is premised on the notion that the stranger has much to teach us, and even, as in the case of the wayfarers in Abraham and Sarah’s home, may bless us.

Once we embrace the notion that reaching out to those who are different from us is important, we need to figure out how to do that, but first we need to work on the third habit of the heart which is withstanding the tensions that inevitably arise in encounters with those who are different from us.

3. Withstanding

Incidentally, I’m not just talking about Clinton supporters talking to Trump supporters. On Yom Kippur we become acutely aware of the contradictions in our lives—from the gap between our aspirations and our behavior to opinions we cannot countenance because they run counter to our convictions. These tensions could make us reluctant to look deeply at ourselves or to remain in relationship with those whose opinions are contradictory to our own. But if we allow these tensions to expand our hearts, they can open us to new understandings of ourselves and our world, enhancing our lives and

⁴ Genesis 18 and 19

allowing us to enhance the lives of others. Today we come face to face with our humanity, and recognize our imperfections and the less than perfect world we inhabit.

Over the summer, the Movement for Black Lives, a consortium of groups focused on creating an equitable society and ending racism in all its forms, issued a statement of principles. It was a lengthy and comprehensive document written by committee that covered a broad range of issues from policing to education, the economy and foreign affairs. The statement critiques many countries that discriminate against parts of their population. Israel faces particular approbation. And in a reference that has drawn the ire of many Jews, the United States is accused of complicity in “genocide” against the Palestinians, among other claims that were a reference to the state of Israel and the occupation. Many Jewish groups felt compelled to issue statements in response—a few supported the statement without reservations while others announced their divorce from the entire Black Lives Matter movement in light of this aggressive position on Israel. I find both of these approaches unproductive and inadequate. Groups that rejected the Black Lives Matter Movement wholesale because of disagreement over Israel make me question their commitment to the overarching goals of ending systemic racism and violence toward black people. I also don’t agree with groups that accepted the statement wholeheartedly. I can understand the impulse to want to ally with a movement dedicated to ending racism, but capitulation or putting on blinders is not the answer. Complete agreement is not necessary to build coalitions with diverse groups, and challenging another’s perspective can often strengthen relationships and deepen our understanding of issues and people. I was proud that the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism took a more nuanced and thoughtful approach, saying,

“We recognize that the Movement for Black Lives is working to address deeply rooted societal challenges. As they do so, we urge them to reject the platform’s characterizations of and positions related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We stand ready to work in relationship to achieve shared goals of a racially just society, nation and world.”

Withstanding the complexity of ourselves and our world means having relationships with others with whom we recognize a common ethic or purpose, but also, more often than not, one or more areas on which our principles are not aligned or are even at odds. It means expressing our truths while simultaneously trying to understand how others see the world. It means remembering that, on some level we may not perceive, “people make sense.” It means having potentially hard conversations that don’t have easy resolutions.

After I read the Movement for Black Lives statement, I felt it was imperative to reach out and talk with activists for black lives, hear what their issues are, express my views, try to find where we have common ground, and keep the lines of communication open on areas of disagreement. What I’ve found, not surprisingly, is that the black activist community, like any other group, is diverse. There’s also a generational divide between the older black leadership and the black church with the younger activists who feel like the older generation and the church have let them down. When I spoke with one of my black pastor colleagues, expressing my concern that mainstream Jewish groups had been excluded from the conversation, he said to me, “Join the club. As an older black male and a church leader, I wasn’t invited to the conversation either.” Others with whom I spoke

listened to my objections about the statements about Israel and took them to heart. What I learned from these conversations is that there are parts of the black community who think the creation of the State of Israel was illegitimate and the only way to address the injustices against the Palestinians is to seek an end to Israel's status as a Jewish state. They were surprised to learn that there might be another way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that there are people in the Jewish community who want to address the injustices against the Palestinians without dismantling the State of Israel.

To express our views openly and honestly without capitulating and without withdrawing is not easy, but the genius of the human heart lies in its capacity to use these tensions to generate insight, energy, and new life.

Making the most of those gifts requires a fourth key habit of the heart...

4. Standing up

Although we need to check our truths against the truths of others, this shouldn't prevent us from standing up for what we believe is right. Some of us lack confidence in our voices or don't think we can make a difference. There's nothing like acting on our convictions when we feel despondent about what's going on in the world. Turning off our screens, closing the paper and taking action can lift our spirits, energize us, and, perhaps, even help us gain insight into how we can most make a difference. When we find ourselves stewing about the state of our country, we need to get out and do something. Make calls, canvass, register people to vote. Participate in the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism's campaign for voter registration and protection. The Reform Movement is building on its successful participation in the NAACP's America's Journey for Justice last summer. The Reform Movement's next step in the campaign for racial justice is aptly named Nitzavim: Standing Up for Voter Protection and Participation. Working alongside local and national partners – the NAACP, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and the PICO National Network – this campaign will engage in voter registration, get out the vote and help monitor elections in order to strengthen civic engagement, protect the right to vote and build a broad and lasting coalition for justice.

After the holidays, Beth Emet will be participating in this campaign. Watch emetmail for how you can get involved in these efforts.

We should not work alone. Having the support of community is crucial at these times. When we are feeling hopeless, angry, and scared, acting with others can energize and focus us and help us contribute positively.

Which leads to a fifth and final habit of the heart...

5. Standing together

Without a community, it is nearly impossible to have a voice that will be heard and activity that will make a significant difference. It takes a community to raise a Rosa Parks. She didn't just decide one day that she was tired and wouldn't move to the back of the bus. The image of Rosa Parks as a meek seamstress gazing out of a bus window belies the fact that she had been an activist against white supremacy for many years. We also know that her singular act of defiance wasn't enough to integrate the buses in Montgomery. The black community, en masse, boycotted the public buses in Montgomery for close to a year before the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a federal district court ruling (*Browder v. Gayle*) that put an end to segregated seating on public buses. Before that fateful day in 1955 when she refused to give up her seat on the bus, Rosa Parks had been active with the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP for over a decade. She had been pushing for voter registration, seeking justice for black victims of white brutality and sexual violence, supporting wrongfully accused black men, and pressing for desegregation of schools and public spaces.

It takes a community not only to create a Rosa Parks but also to translate acts of personal integrity into social change. We need to stand together if we want democracy to flourish.

Some of our community experienced the power of standing together with diverse groups this past summer for the unveiling of the Martin Luther King memorial in Marquette Park and the recreation of the march for housing rights that was led by Martin Luther King there fifty years ago. Thousands of people of all races, ages, and backgrounds showed up to remember that fateful day fifty years ago when 700 marchers were confronted by an angry mob and Martin Luther King was struck by a brick. Fifty years ago Marquette Park was a place that black parents warned their children to stay away from, but on August 5 and 6, 2016, black, Latino, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish children and adults marched together, enjoyed a gorgeous summer day in the park, and admired the powerful and beautiful memorial to Martin Luther King's legacy. "This is what democracy looks like!" I thought as I looked at the diverse group that was assembled peacefully together.

Although we have a ways to go to create equity and safety for all our citizens and neighborhoods in Chicago, and here in Evanston, that day as I marched with members of Beth Emet, including my nine year old nephew, Eli, and we chatted freely and joyfully with the other marchers who reflected the diversity of Chicago, I thought that Martin Luther King had to be smiling down upon us. I was excited that my nephew was among the marchers, learning from an early age that separation, division and fear of the other are not how we should live. In 1966, Martin Luther King called the march in Marquette Park the first step in a thousand-mile journey. In August, I felt like we made a few more strides toward creating the Beloved Community he envisioned, a community in which everyone is treated with dignity and equity regardless of the color of their skin, their religious preferences, or the size of their bank account. Gatherings like that one instill hope and remind me that change for the better is possible when people of good will stand together.

Terry Tempest Williams, writer, conservationist, and activist wrote:

“The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up—ever—trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?”

Living by these five principles is not as easy as living in the echo chambers of social media or our preferred news sources, but if we want to live with hope and not despair, if we want to make a positive difference in the world, this is a challenge we must accept.

As parashat Nitzavim continues, the Israelites are given a choice as to how they want to live—to choose a life of blessing or its opposite. They are also told that although it may seem difficult, God assures them that they have the ability to choose the right path. As we learn in Torah: “It’s not in the heavens that you should say, “who’s going to go up to heaven on our behalf so that we might do it? “ Nor is it across the sea that you should say, “who will cross the sea on our behalf so that we may do it? No, this is very near to you—in your mouth and in your heart—that you can surely do it.”⁵ We are in a quandary similar to what the Israelites faced. Do we throw up our hands in despair or do we, despite the difficulty and anxiety we might feel, learn to listen to each other, see our differences as strengths, withstand the tension that comes from honestly and sincerely engaging those who are different from us, stand up for what is right and just, and stand together to create a strong, vibrant, and equitable society?

Taking these steps is not easy. It requires time, patience, and support. My vision for Beth Emet is that we should be a place where we support each other to live by these five principles—Understanding, Standing out, Withstanding, Standing up, and Standing together. We are a place where we tend to our souls—our fears, frustrations, struggles, questions, concerns—through spiritual practices and Jewish teachings, and a place where we care for the soul of the world by engaging in intelligent and thoughtful conversations about issues, deepening relationships with diverse groups, and working collaboratively on issues facing our society. In addition to working on the upcoming election, this year we will continue working on issues of systemic injustice and inequity with our partners at Second Baptist and Grace Lutheran churches, we will have a forum on economic inequality next month, and we are exploring through the Syrian Community Network and with other churches in our area how we can best be supportive of refugee families settling in our community. Of course, there will be other opportunities as well as the year progresses.

Before we sing *Mi Chamocha* on Erev Shabbat, we pray the following words: “Wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt, that there is a better place, a promised land; that the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness. That there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together.”

As we stand together on the cusp of this new year, let’s join hands and march together into a year in which we have the chutzpah to express ourselves and act on our

⁵ Deuteronomy 30:11-14

convictions, the humility to open our hearts to others' points of view, and the courage and strength to continue working for that which is just and kind despite the obstacles in our path.