

October 2, 2016

Fences

Rosh Hashanah 2016/5777

By: Rabbi Diana Fersko

Shanah Tovah.

Every year I teach the story of the Exodus to the children in our community. You know the story. We were slaves in Egypt, God made ten plagues, the Red Sea parted, and we broke free from the shackles of slavery. Every year, I tell our children how the Israelites, a group of bedraggled slaves, ran to that sea, with the full force of the Egyptian army pursuing close behind. When the sea parted, and we got to the other side, we sang and danced - full of joy.

Do you know the number one reaction to this story year after year? Can you guess? The first thing our children ask is...What about the Egyptians? What happened to the Egyptians? Why did **they** have to get swept into the sea? Would you like to know the second most common reaction...our kids, in this community, ask, what about the innocent horses that the Egyptians were using to chase us. Why did they too have to die? There's more concern for the Egyptians than for the enslaved. The hierarchy is horses over Hebrews.

Compassion for others is good. It's not just good, it's right - it's religiously mandated. We should be proud that our children are empathic. But after years of this repeated conversation, there's something about it that bothers me, does it bother you a little also? After all, the Haggadah says "remember that you were a *slave* in Egypt." It says remember as if you yourself were there in Egypt as a slave. It definitely does not say remember that you were an Egyptian task-master.

So what's up with that? Why do Egyptians garner greater sympathy than Israelites? I'm glad you asked. We've gotten to this point of strange identification because liberal Jews have broken too many Jewish boundaries. We've peeled back the layers of tradition so much, that we're often unsure of who we really are. We're kind of confused even about the most fundamental aspects of our identity. That's the bad news. But the good news is that we, in this sanctuary, are in the position to correct that mistake and we can start right now.

Not identifying with the story of the Exodus is only a symbol of a larger problem. We live in a world where matzah balls made of pork are supposed to be an ironic, humorous twist on an old classic. We live in a world where being a universal life minister is a thing. I don't know what kind of thing it is, but it's a thing that can apparently officiate Jewish weddings. We live in a world where making Jewish choices is completely optional and quite often, we opt out. We live in a world where we don't know the

contours of being Jewish. We've broken down so many boundaries, this year, we can start building them back up.

The ancient Rabbis talked a lot about this issue - this need to protect Judaism so that it doesn't lose its shape. Living under the weight of the Roman Empire, they understood the fragility of Jewish identity. They taught about a Gezeirat Torah, a fence around the Torah. They foresaw back then, that even now, we would need to create a perimeter of protection around our identities lest we should lose ourselves.

We hear the word fence a lot lately. A major presidential candidate wants to build a fence along our entire southern border. I swear that thing gets bigger and bigger every time I hear about it. By now, it's "Uge!" That fence is about keeping people out. It's fueled by fear and close-mindedness.

But the Rabbis were talking about something else. To them, a fence wasn't about keeping people out, it was about locking something sacred in. It wasn't a literal thing; it was a philosophical boundary meant to contain Jewish existence. It was built of Jewish practice, knowledge, and community. It was there to allow the fragile flower of being a Jew to flourish and blossom.

So even though it feels risky to say, a little uncomfortable, and maybe even anti-liberal, in order to perpetuate our people, we need some more separation, not less. We need more tradition, not less. If we don't, the very sense of what it means to be a Jew will continue to dwindle.

So what is your fence? What can you do to nourish and protect Judaism so that it can grow? Could we all do a little more?

Now boundaries are really hard for us. They're sort of a prickly subject. Because breaking boundaries is precisely what makes liberal Judaism great. Breaking with tradition has put us on the right side of history over and over again. Just this year, the movement issued a far-reaching resolution on transgender rights. Yes! Years before that, we led the charge to officiate and accept gay marriage. When DOMA went down, you know Reform Jews everywhere celebrated. In the 70s we broke with a centuries old male only policy in the rabbinate. Let me offer a personal thank you to Reform Judaism, you are awesome, you are visionary. We frequently forsake tradition for the sake of social progress. It's one of our greatest contributions to the religious world, and we should proudly wave that flag of progress.

That's the positive, but it's not all good. At times, we've seriously gone too far. In the nascent days the Reform Movement: Isaac Mayer Wise said "America is our Zion, not dried up Palestine." We wrote that we, "totally disapprove of any attempt for the establishment of a Jewish State." We did not support the State of Israel. We broke a boundary of tradition and we regretted it.

Or, take this example. You may not know that at one point, we moved Shabbat to Sundays. Not our best laid plan. We undid that one too. We realized we went too far in straying from our tradition.

This dance of tradition versus progress, old versus new, isn't just about what the Movement does, it's about what we do. We live in a culture where Saturdays are basically for playing soccer, or something like that. And that's our reality. This year, could we also put Shabbat into the mix? We live in a world where brit milah in a sanctuary is often replaced by circumcision in a hospital. We live in a world where B'nai Mitzvah are often celebrated in a museum instead of a sacred space. You tell me, are we inside or outside that fence of tradition? Are we making the same mistakes that our ancestors made? Like I said, boundaries are really hard for us.

This year, can we prioritize preserving our people over our personal autonomy? Can we fence in something sacred so it can be sustained?

To do so, we must define what is sacred about Judaism. Is it a precious memory from your childhood that you hope your children will also have? To you, what is worth preserving? Whatever it is, we each must define that for ourselves and build up a boundary to safeguard that identity.

That fence, the Jewish conception of fence, is not made of wire or brick or stone. It's made of involvement with Judaism. It's made of Torah learning, Shabbat worship, Religious School, Jewish weddings, Jewish friends, Jewish books, and Jewish knowledge. The fence is made out of awareness of history. It's made out of the embrace of the fact that we are the living remnant of a particular ancient people. The fence is acknowledgment that we in this room are but a sliver of survivors of a shockingly recent genocide. It's acknowledgement that most of our ancestors were savagely murdered, but we still persist. The fence is about taking pride that we are the inventors of the week, the smashers of idols, the launching pad for Western culture. It's appreciating the sheer absurdity that we, the descendants of an "oddball tribe" of wanderers and slaves from the Middle East somehow ended up achieving unparalleled success on the island of Manhattan, at least for now. The fence is clinging to the notion that we are lovers of unresolved questions and holders of multiples truths. It's about respecting ancient rabbis who transformed the trajectory of our tradition and honoring the soldiers who fight every day to defend Israel. It's about being proud that we are descendants of Esther and that we inherited the literary tradition of Ecclesiastes. It's about watching your child chant Torah and hoping that their child will chant Torah too. The fence is about knowing who we are and about knowing before whom we stand.

This year we must build up the boundaries of our identity so that we don't break down. I can't compel anyone to take on this mantle any more than someone else can compel me to stop. But this year, in 5777, I hope you'll join me in reassembling our fractured fences and placing a blanket of protection around the kernel of Jewish core that lies within each of us. Shanah Tovah.