

Parshat Emor
 May 3, 2014
 “A strange *bracha* about blessing strange people”
 Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Here is what I would like to do this morning. I'd like to teach you a *bracha*, I'd like to tell you a story and I'd like to discuss with you some things that have happened this past week that concerns me and then let's see if we can put that *bracha* that I am going to teach you to work.

So first the *bracha*, as you know it is often joked that we Jews have a blessing for everything but this one is a bit strange although it is one of my favorites. We don't get to say it so often – or at least it doesn't get said that often – maybe it should:

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech Haolom Meshaneh Habriot

Praised Are You God who has created a variety of different types of people.

Traditionally this *bracha* is recited when you see someone of unusual form, someone physically different than we are.

So my first question this morning is why do you think there is such a *bracha*? Why is there a *bracha* that calls upon us to praise God and see blessing in those who are strikingly different?

Maybe a story will help us figure this out. This is a story that we Jews have been telling each other for some 2000 years now. It appears in the Talmud, tractate *Taanit* 20a and deals with one Rabbi Elazar the son of R' Shimon. In this particular story we are not told much about the lead up to it – other than R' Elazar – a great and respected teacher of his day – was riding home on his donkey. The Talmud takes the time to tell us he was feeling pretty good about himself – imagine yourself cruising down the Meadowbrook, on your way to the beach, top down and maybe you can imagine the good rabbi's mood. Anyway, it seems he had just done some good learning, the sun was shining – and all was well with the world. And there is Rabbi Elazar, sitting on his donkey on this fine day, humming a tune and feeling all is right with the world when he spots a very ugly man, standing by the side of the river. That is all the Talmud tells us about this guy. We never learn his name – or anything about him for that matter – the only thing we ever know is that he was ugly. A bit harsh you say? Well – if you think that was harsh – wait till you hear what comes next.

The great rabbi chastises the man saying – “Get out of my sight, you have ruined my day, destroyed my good mood – you are so ugly, get away from me!”

How would you like to have him as your rabbi? But now comes the real point of the story – this anonymous man – whom the Talmud does not even share his name, this man whom we know nothing about except for the fact that he was ugly – he quietly turns to the famous rabbi and says – “Look don’t complain to me, complain to the one who made me.” Ouch!

The great Rabbi immediately realizes how wrong he was – he gets off his donkey and asks the stranger for forgiveness. The anonymous man replies – “ but, it is not my forgiveness that you seek – you did not offend me, you must seek forgiveness from the one you offended – the one who made me.” Now the story has a somewhat amusing ending – as it says the rabbi followed the man all the way back to town begging for his forgiveness – the man refusing, insisting – that he take it up with God not him. As they get to town, the people come out to see the commotion – clearly the rabbi had been hoping to settle this quietly before they got to town – but when the people begin to understand what had happened – they turn to their friend, the ugly man, and ask – “Do you know who this is who has offended you and now asks for your forgiveness?” One can imagine his response – something on the level of – “I do not know who he is and to tell you the truth, I’m not particularly interested in learning more about him - -I don’t anticipate I will be pursuing a relationship with him...” “This,” say the towns people, “is the great Rabbi Elazar, you *must* forgive him, his greatness, it would seem, *demand*s such forgiveness.

But, it is Rabbi Elazar’s initial error that intrigues me. How could such a “wise” man be so stupid? I think both this story and the *bracha* I taught at the outset emerge from the same reality: There is a certain natural revulsion that we all have to people who are very different than we are. Anthropologists tell us that this has become rooted in our DNA from the earliest of times when strangers and those who were different from family or members of the clan could pose a life threatening danger. But today, the challenge is to confront that initial primal inclination to reject those who are different and find a place for them in our hearts, in our world – to understand that God created a world of enormous diversity – and that diversity is not a curse – it is a blessing. *Praised Are You God* who has created a variety of different types of people.

Today's torah portion is "Emor" – Speak. "The Lord **said** to Moses: **Speak** to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and **say** to them..." There's a whole lot of talkin' going on. The entire torah could be seen as an education into how we should speak to each other – the challenge to use words to bless and heal not to curse and inflict. Words can be used to draw near – words can be used to push away. Rabbi Elazar realizes that his thoughtless words pushed one of God's creatures away. He felt terrible – he learned a lesson. There is a bracha – *meshaneh habriot* – it helps us each catch ourselves when we are about to dismiss one of God's creatures because they are different. When we recite this bracha we force ourselves to say words of kindness instead of hurt – words that draw near rather than push away.

If you are white, black people are different than you are. *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech Haolom Meshaneh Habriot*

Praised Are You Praised Are You God who has created a variety of different types of people.

If you are black, white people are different than you are. *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech Haolom Meshaneh Habriot*

Praised Are You God who has created a variety of different types of people.

Donald Sterling – do I need to explain to anyone who Donald Sterling is? How many of you did what I did when this story first broke? How many of you quietly muttered to yourself, "Please don't let him be Jewish; Please don't let him be Jewish ---- Oh no he's Jewish!!" There is a little redemption in the fact that the president of the NBA Adam Sterling is also Jewish – a little – but not a lot.

So, Donald Sterling, the disgraced owner of the LA Clippers, sees black people as different but he couldn't see that as a source of blessing. I was embarrassed by Rabbi Elazar in the Talmud when he chastised that man for being ugly – but at least *he* learned his lesson. Did Donald Sterling learn his? Based on his initial comments, it doesn't seem so. Learning to live with people who are different than us; learning to love people who are different than us – is a challenge some of us have clearly not yet mastered.

This past week, J-Street lost in its bid to gain membership in the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. The organization that calls itself "pro peace, pro Israel" failed to garner the requisite votes. Look, I am no fan of J-Street. I attended the AIPAC Conference and feel that time and time again J Street has had the opportunity to prove to me

they are as pro-Israel as they claim to be – and time and time again they have disappointed me. I am no fan of J-Streets leader, Jeremy Ben-Ami. It is not my style of leadership. He is too confrontational for my taste, too critical. But, the question that was up for vote this past week was not whether I agreed with J Street, not even whether we the Jewish community like what they stand for – the question was do they deserve a seat at the Jewish communal table. I think they do. I am glad the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism voted in favor of inclusion. Again – they did not vote in favor of J-Street, they voted I favor of inclusion:

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech Haolom Meshaneh Habriot

Praised Are You God who has created a variety of different types of people. We don't have to agree with someone, we don't even have to like someone to accept them as part of God's universe, at least as much a part of it as we are.

Look boundary issues are tough issues. Defining who is in and who is out – can be some of the most challenging and problematic issues we will ever face. It starts when we agonize as a pre-teen over who will be part of our “group” and who won't and continues throughout our lives. As a Jewish community these boundary issues are without a doubt some of our thorniest dilemmas: Who is a Jew, Patrilineal Jews, Jews for Jesus, Homosexual Jews, Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, Orthodox Jews, Feminist Jews, Anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodox Jews – who is in and who is out? And who gets to decide?

Each of these issues is complex, and no two are alike. I have spent much of my adult life wrestling with these issues. But today – I am concerned not so much with any one of them as all of them taken together – that the *trend* seems to be one of *exclusion* rather than *inclusion*, that we are losing the ability to see diversity as a blessing. In Judaism as in America, as in too much of the world - everyone seems to want everyone else to be just like them or they won't be allowed to join in. Tea Party Republicans reject mainstream Republicans and certainly Democrats. Left Wing Democrats reject mainstream Democrats and certainly Republicans. Shia's persecute Sunnis and Sunnis persecute Shias and how does that old Tom Lehrer song parody go – “and everybody hates the Jews...”

Russell Mead argues in Foreign Policy Magazine that all over the world there is a pre-modern movement to eliminate diversity. What we call pluralism is under attack.

In China, in Russia in Iran you will be arrested, prosecuted and persecuted if you express views that are too different from those of the ruling powers. So people have to learn to keep their mouths shut and their thoughts to themselves. In the Middle East, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian community – the list goes on and on – pluralism is *not* a value. There is only one sanctioned way to believe and only one sanctioned way to think. Believe differently, think differently and you will pay a high price – maybe even life itself. Much of Africa is being overwhelmed by this pre-modern way of thinking. Our “modern era” has been marked by almost 350 years of relative tolerance. This tolerance has from time to time been tested, as the Nazis did but the other powers fought back. But the tide seems to be changing – and as Charles Hill the legendary State Department officer who now teaches at Yale said recently: “the modern era seems to be stalling out after some 300 plus years. The replacement era will not be modern and will not be a nice one.”

A couple of weeks ago I spoke about the CEO of Firefox who was ousted because of his views about homosexuality – he was against same sex marriages. This week we have the exclusion of J Street. The attacks come from the left and the right. But what both have in common is a desire to limit diversity.

Yom Ha-atzmaut is next week. We will celebrate 66 years since independence and the birth of the modern miracle that is *Eretz Yisrael* but what once was a unifying force in the Jewish community has become a source of conflict and strife.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove complains that his mailbox is filled with appeals over the upcoming Celebrate Israel Parade on June 1. Debate is swirling over who should be allowed to march and who shouldn't be allowed to march. I understand exactly what he is describing as we are asked to support a ban on the New Israel Fund – as they are – in the opinion of some – anti-Israel, anti-Jewish and have no place in “our” parade. Some Orthodox groups threaten that if Gay Jews march under an openly Gay banner, *they* will boycott the parade.

Ramaz day school invited Rashid Khalidi, a Columbia Scholar of the Middle East and a voice for the Palestinians, to speak to the student body. She was then dis-invited as her views were considered beyond the pale for the Orthodox Day School. The Jewish Museum had to rescind an invitation it had made to literary theorist Judith Butler who was invited to speak on Kafka – because elsewhere she had expressed strong criticism of Israel and why should a Jewish Museum welcome such an unabashed critic of Israel?

The list goes on and on - and it is critical to emphasize that not all these examples are the same. Each deserves thought and consideration.

But again, I can't help but notice a trend – and the trend concerns me – from the left and from the right – our options are being limited. There is less and less tolerance for those whose opinions are not like “ours”. There have always been things that have been outside the bounds of the acceptable – it is just that those bounds seem to be getting smaller and smaller. And as Rabbi Cosgrove concludes, “Technology provides the tools to turn every teapot into a tempest and we never seem to fail to create the opportunity to do so.”

The torah portion for today, *parshat emor*, offers some additional insight. Instructing the Israelites on the laws of priestly conduct and the calendar cycle, God then speaks to Moses: “Command the Israelite people to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly.” Here the Torah transmits the divine instruction for establishing the *ner tamid*, the eternal light – still found in every synagogue just above the *aron kodesh* – the sacred ark. The rabbis of *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* noticed a paradox – why does God want us to light this menorah at all? Why does God need *our* light?? “*Mi kamocho*- Who is like You? You God, give light to the celestial and terrestrial beings. You give light to all who come into the world – and yet you crave our light? You want *us* to light the menorah?”

The rabbis here ask a very good question. How can we add anything to God? How can we hope to make any kind of contribution to God who is the source of all life, to the Creator of the universe? What can we give to God who has everything?

Bar Kappara explained: “The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to humankind: “Your lamp is in My hand and My lamp shall be in your hands. If you light My lamp, I shall light yours.” The rabbis saw the *ner tamid* – as an allusion to the human soul – bring My light into the world, says God, and I will make sure your light shines.

One bright day, 2000 years ago, Rabbi Elazar realized in a moment of terribly poor judgment that his thoughtless words made God's world darker and not brighter. He rode his donkey, feeling so good about himself and then he confronted the ugly man who was so different than he was.

You know it is amazing the rabbis preserved this story even though it reflected so poorly on one of their own – one who should have known better. But I think they understood as he came to understand, that this was not the way God wanted us to walk in His world.

The next time you are tempted to speak words of disgust as R' Elazar did – don't say those words – say these: *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech Haolom Meshaneh Habriot* "Praised are you *Adonai* our God who has created a variety of different types of people."

Mi kamocho – who is like You O Lord? *We* are like you – we who are created in Your image – every single one of us are *kamocho* – like You – every tall one and short one- every fat one and skinny one – every beautiful one and ugly one – every smooth skinned and wrinkled skinned – every gray haired one of us – every left wing and right wing once of us – we are like You.