

From the Rabbi

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Kislev 5776

“As Yourself”

Everything became clear for me at the moment when I met the middle-aged guy in the rumpled sport jacket and nondescript necktie at the coffee and Danish reception in the 911 Museum. He turned out to be the chief Zen master of Central New Jersey. That’s when I knew I had arrived at the center of hope for humanity.

The reception (such as it was) preceded the multi-faith ceremony led by Pope Francis on his recent visit to New York. The Pope had asked for this event in addition to the pro forma masses and parades he would inevitably attend. Those events would be lovely and memorable. But this was something different altogether. (The ceremony, that is, not the coffee and Danish.)

The Pope wanted to appear on the same level as leaders from a spectrum of world faiths. He wanted no greater role in the ceremony than anyone else. He desperately wanted to deliver his signature message: Humankind is “discarding” the earth as if it were a piece of used trash. We need to come together *in faith* in order to rally ourselves to renew our loving relationship with creation. Only in this *spiritual* way can we find the will to muster science, industry, education, politics, and economics to avoid an otherwise unavoidable disaster.

Yes, it was exciting to see the world’s most famous religious leader up close, and to say that I had been there and shaken his hand. But more important than the sighting of the guest of honor was the *fact* of the gathering, and the *make-up* of the attendees.

Here were people not merely of the usual mix of faiths, but of *very* different faiths and creeds. Very different costumes and ideologies. No “we all believe in the same God” routines, since several key participants in the ceremony represented religions that really *don’t* believe in a deity whatsoever.

It may have been the first time in history that the leader of the world’s largest and most powerful religion stood on an equal plane with everyone else and made it

clear that he had no interest in converting the rest of us to his way of believing. For me as Jew, it was exhilarating to think that this Pope really had no hidden theological agenda. No expectations of me, other than that I would join him in rallying the people of the earth to celebrate our planet's sanctity and strive to preserve it.

I tell you this story not to laud the Pope. There is plenty to criticize about his inaction on Church policies that perpetuate disease, over-population, and poverty in Africa, as well as the submission of women world-wide. Rather, I tell you this because the Papal interfaith event represented the possibility that people who don't think alike can still speak civilly (even lovingly) to one another, and can come together around great causes.

I worry (yes, I wake up in the middle of the night worrying) about our college campuses as they quickly turn from places of mutual respect to bastions of blame and victimhood. I wonder whether any number of today's university students (and professors, too, I regret to say) would have been able to attend the Pope's ceremony without protesting the word choice of one or another participant; without objecting to the implicit cultural message in the seating arrangement; without disrupting the proceedings because a trigger warning hadn't been issued regarding the distressing message of climate change or the traumatic reminders of the World Trade Center setting itself.

Yes, I care deeply about correcting cultural and societal injustices perpetrated over the centuries by whoever happened to hold the reins of power at any given moment. Yes, I want our campuses and halls of government to reflect a deep sensitivity to those historical imbalances, and to do everything in their power to effect what our Rabbis called a *takkanah*, a correction of law or practice for the sake of achieving justice and righteousness.

But I know as a veteran citizen of the multi-vocal, multivalent world that such idealistic goals are achieved *only* by coming together and listening to one another's conflicting voices, rather than by shouting down or banning those voices we abhor. And, those goals are only accomplished over time, as the result of unflagging dedication to a long and tedious process. It requires us to know the ultimate goal *now*, but to realize we have to live our lives together *on the way* to that goal, perhaps never to reach it to the extent we all dream of.

Whether it is within our Jewish community – where some would-be defenders of Israel have become increasingly intolerant of Jewish leaders whose thoughts are not precisely in line with their own – or in the academic community – where even liberal champions of human rights and tolerance can be shouted down *because* they are Israeli or supporters of Israel – we will only achieve anything vaguely resembling social justice when people start giving each other the benefit of the doubt and letting each other speak.

What is our Jewish role in this dilemma? How can we do our part to help our fellow Americans out of this tailspin?

First, we must clean our own house. We need to exhibit tolerance and respect in our own gatherings, in our manner of addressing our leaders, and in our interfaces with the public at large.

Second, we need to prepare our Jewish children for the fact that college is often a place of closed-mindedness as well as open-mindedness. We need to prepare them for upsetting experiences as well as uplifting ones. We need to train them in techniques of promoting civil discourse, civil rights and free speech. We need to teach them about our own Jewish experience of quotas and discrimination, as well as our historic involvement in America's struggles for civil rights, workers' rights, and religious liberty, so that they can appreciate their unique Jewish role in America's story.

Finally, we need to continue something we've been doing for decades, namely, working through our Jewish federations, congresses, committees, councils, and so forth to keep the great American message alive, and to bring closer the day when all Americans will be able to benefit from living here, regardless of who they are or what they look like.

I suspect that the Pope's grand idea of a fully accepting multi-faith gathering could only have been pulled off in the United States. I doubt he has tried it elsewhere. I shudder to think that one day soon, our growing social intolerance would make such an event impossible. That's why we not only need to save our planet from human carelessness. We need to save humanity itself from its inability to act like human beings toward one another.

That, for sure, is a Jewish message we could easily universalize: *v'ahavta l'reyacha kamocha* – “Love your neighbor as yourself.” No one should be surprised to hear that this verse is at the more-or-less dead center of the Torah. And it's an idea that the Zen master of New Jersey and I could immediately agree on. Now for the rest of humanity!

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