

In June of this year I sat inside the courtroom of the Supreme Court as Justice Kennedy read his majority opinion in Obergefell vs Hodges- the case that guarantees the right to same sex marriage. I had been to the courtroom a few times over the course of the year and I knew the drill. The marshals warned us as they do every time to sit and be silent. We rose as the justices entered the room and sat down all anticipating the long awaited decision of the court. As Justice Kennedy read his opinion he said

“In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.”

As these words flowed out of Justice Kennedy’s mouth I heard a noise behind me- I couldn’t figure out what it was and it was unusual indeed for there to be any noise coming from the courtroom. I turned around and saw two men –that looked to be in their 50s- holding hands and weeping.

And in that very moment I understood something was happening that was much deeper than justice. I understood that to be seen- to be able to live as you truly are- is redemption.

We as humans have a very hard time with difference and granting dignity to that difference. We have a hard time not only doing this when we look out into the world but we do it to our families, our kids, our colleagues, and to ourselves.

In the Torah we come upon a character who's very name is struggle- Yaakov or Yisrael as he is eventually named. Yaakov is someone we might know striving clearly but- at the same time- trying always to be someone who he is not- even to the point of dressing in his "brother's person" with hair and the smell of the hunt so as to deceive his father so that he can receive the blessing. In his book *Be Still and Get Going*- Alan Lew alav hashalom writes about Yaakov saying:

"The character who seems to dislike Jacob most of all, of course, is Jacob himself. This is why he is always trying to be someone or something he is not. ...The angel of God tells Jacob that the very thing he can't stand about himself- the very thing no one can stand about him- is in fact his divine name- Yisrael- he continually struggles with God and with man, rails against his lot in life, tries to take that which is not his. Yet here we learn that he is this way because this is how God has made him. This is his uniqueness, the source of his power in the world, and this no doubt is precisely why he can't stand this quality in himself. It's what makes him different from others, and it's what makes him powerful, and therefore threatening to others as well.

This, says Lew, is the most significant moment of personal transformation we ever reach in our lives- the moment when we realize that the thing we can't stand about ourselves is our divine name; the moment we realize that the thing about ourselves we have been avoiding, the thing we hate to see, is the very thing that makes us unique, that gives us our unique power as human beings." (Lew, 30-31)

The struggle towards uncovering- towards self actualization-the struggle that Jacob engages in -is not just a struggle with self -but also something that has cosmic significance. In the Torah *Shleimah*, a work that comprises midrashic and Talmudic

commentary on the Torah, it says at the time of Jacob's struggle with the angel - there was dust kicked up by Jacob and the angel during their battle and that very dust reached all the way up to the Throne of Glory, - the Throne of God! signifying the effect of that struggle on all future history. In other words the struggle for Yaakov to find himself and his blessing was so significant that it would affect generations to come. Yaakov's self actualization is what allows him in the very next chapter of Breishit to encounter the one he hates and the one who hates him- Esau.

The text tells us:

Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau came...Jacob bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him and they wept. (Genesis 33:1-3)

When the cosmic dust kicked up to shamayim from Jacob's work he not only saw himself- but he could see the other. In his case Esau.

To be a religious person is to spend the time struggling with self, uncovering our own hard, real and divine truth –but not stopping there---then going on to make room for the differences that exist in others all around us.

The writer Andrew Solomon in his book *Far from the Tree* talks about people living on the edges of society because of what our society because our society has not made room for difference. One of the people Solomon talks about is a dwarf by the name of Clinton Brown- when he was born he was diagnosed with something called diastrophic dwarfism- a very disabling condition and his parents were told that he would never walk, he would never talk, he would have no intellectual capacity and he would probably not even recognize them- the doctors suggested to the parents that they leave him in the hospital so he could die quietly

and his mother said she wouldn't do it. She said she would take her son home and even though she did not have educational or financial advantages- she found the best doctor in the country for dealing with disastrophic dwarfism and she got Clinton enrolled with him- over the course of his childhood he had 30 major surgical procedures. While stuck in the hospital his mother sent tutors in to teach him and he ended up achieving things that could never have been contemplated. He was the first in his family to go to college where he lived on campus and drove a specially fitted car.

Solomon said to Clinton's mother- what do you think you did to help him become this charming and accomplished person? And she said, "what did I do?" "I loved him that's all. Clinton just always had that light in him and his father and I were lucky enough to be the first to see it there."

This story is not just about a person with a physical difficulty- a story to make us feel good and uplifted. This is your story and my story. This is about not letting the experts define the contours of our lives or the lives of our kids. What we should be doing. How we should be parenting. How they should be learning. How a kid with ADHD should be sitting in a chair in a classroom for 8 hours in a school day- because that is what our society has decided is a good way for everyone to learn. It is about uncovering what makes us unique and holy and gifted- in our difference and finding a place in this world to raise that up.

It is about encouraging our kids to hear their own creativity, their own voices, their own callings. It's about stopping for a second in this town of high achievers- and not looking at the portfolio of the person just above you and killing yourself because you haven't gotten there- but looking at you, right now, right where you are and making room for that. It is about stopping this business that everyone should speak the same way, present in the same way, and

fit in to this ridiculous human constructed box that just doesn't work. It is for the brown child who sits in our pews but is told to prove he is Jewish because he looks different. It is about the teenager struggling with addiction who can't talk about it because it is too hard for us. It is about a boy named Ahmed and his clock and another boy named Trayvon who wore a hoody that "looked dangerous" and was shot down. It is about "I can't breathe" because the constraints that we have put on each other are too tight and are strangling us all. Enough. It is time for us to make room for each other. Right here, right now.

I don't say this so that you will think anything goes- Anarchy. I'm not preaching for that. Yes there are rules and structures and yes it is good to strive.

But if we are striving for conformity and singularity, then we have muted God- God who has created a world of difference, of multiplicity.

The midrash teaches us that when the Holy One created Adam, God led him around all of the trees of the Garden of Eden- God said, "Look how beautiful how splendid each one is --as if to say how unique- Take care of each one- that you do not destroy my world, for if you do, there will be no one left to repair what you have destroyed."

Please God let us hear the words in this teaching tonight. Let us see the dignity, the holiness of difference. Please God help us to struggle to find and uncover the divine name in each one of us- please God let us make room for the other- Please God make us worthy of being called the children of Yisrael.

I want to bless you as Ari and I bless our kids every Friday night.

Haye asher tihiye, vihaye baruch asher tihiye. Be who you are and may you be blessed in all that you are. (Marcia Falk)

And let us all say

Amen