

D'var Torah Bemidbar, 5780
JOC Shabbat
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Emanuel Congregation

Last night, we began a conversation about the power of the Wilderness as a place that invites honesty and humility, a place that breaks down our presuppositions and assumptions about who we are - and who we are not; a place that avails us wide-opportunity to grow, to improve and to rise up to our better selves. Our key text also juxtaposes the Tent of Meeting with the midbar, and calls us to responsibility - that while we are collectively making our way through the desert of our becoming, while we are becoming more honest with ourselves, while we are seeking to become our better selves, we must make sure to count all in our Tent of Meeting, who are engaged in spiritual growth themselves, to make sure that everyone is properly counted, to make sure everyone matters, to make sure we've done everything to ensure that everyone who matters *feels* like they matter.

And so I repeat our big questions from last night: Given this COVID-CHAOS which often feels like a desert of disconnection and isolation and loneliness and uncertainty in its own right, how can our parashat ha-shavua bring us a little inspiration as we find our way? What is our call to action? What must we do to stay connected? What must we do to ensure all are counted?

We also discussed last night this practice of census - of counting, of accounting for the matterness of all - we discussed this sacred practice as key to our inreach efforts, as key in our capacity to care for others. Our community is only as strong as our ability to connect with those who feel disconnected, with those who feel marginalized, with those who don't always feel adequately counted or included.

So, while I am proud of our progress thus far as we grind through this pandemic, I know we have yet a long way to go. Just take, for example, the flurry of recent articles regarding deep concern over various studies that support the fact that Jews of Color and their families have been historically under-counted and under-served by the Jewish community.

What are the implications of this? For important guidance on this question, I turn to the wisdom of Yavilah McCoy, CEO of Dimensions Inc, which works with the Jewish community on diversity, equity, and inclusion. I wholly recommend her article: "Dancing

between the Light and Shadow - Increasing Awareness of the Impact of COVID-19 Disparities on Jews of Color. You can find it on the internet.

Here, Ms. McCoy tells a powerful story about her own personal pandemic experience:

When the pandemic hit this country and our national shut-down began, I lost my previously healthy mother to “undetermined” causes in a rural North Carolina hospital. In late March, I flew on an empty plane to arrange a Jewish burial for her within 24 hours. I arrived to an Orthodox Jewish community that was spinning with the impact of navigating rising deaths among them while being prohibited by state mandated restrictions from observing usual Jewish rituals for burial. I also arrived at a hospital in the Black southern community where my mother lived and encountered doctors and nurses working without protective gear, without the capacity for testing patients and without any expectation that resources would be coming their way any time soon.

The ongoing challenges in the pandemic for Jews of Color, Ms. McCoy reports, are intense

- People living in packed dwellings with multiple generations some of whom are sick;
- People worried about family members facing life and death situation amidst mass incarceration;
- People risking health & safety in essential roles without proper government support because joblessness means homelessness.
- People navigating a racialized system that devalues a person of color beyond the service one can provide to a white person.

Yavilah McCoy’s narrative and ensuing analysis about Jews of Color hits hardest because it’s not that these challenges suddenly popped up out of the pandemic-laden blue. These challenges were just worse by the COVID-chaos.

- Increased vulnerability not only to a lethal virus but “fundamentally inequitable systems that have been killing people in Black and Brown bodies for centuries.”

- Within our country, we are witnessing daily how systems that have not changed in regard to racial injustice, police brutality, criminal justice reform, voting rights & suppression, immigration justice, economic injustice, LGBTQIA+ and human rights, environmental conditions, healthcare, government corruption, education and commonsense gun laws are making people of color in this country more and not less vulnerable.

While this pandemic accidentally avails us the opportunity to build back better our synagogues, our schools, and our summer camps, what will we do to build back better our relationship with those who identify as Jews of Color? Ms. McCoy and other Jews of Color wonder:

How will the narratives that Jewish leaders are proximate and not proximate to impact their ability to address how Jews of Color, as a historically vulnerable population among Jews, will make it through this pandemic without being made more vulnerable within Jewish systems and within the country's navigation of Covid responsiveness?

Answering this question must be a critical responsibility going forward, if we are to get truly proximate in our work of building back better.

You may remember that we began this conversation on Yom Kippur, and I followed up on it recently as part of our Sefirat Ha-Omer Project. In both contexts, I focus on the power of hachnasat orchim - the spirit and practice of welcoming and inclusion.

As a Reform movement, we recognize a very important truth -so beautifully captured here:

“Jewish diversity, in all its hues, is no longer a wave – it is the ocean of Jewish life.”

At Emanuel Congregation, we keep the doors of hachnasat orchim open always - whether at 5959 North Sheridan or here in cyberspace. Our village -whether in physical or virtual form - welcomes you no matter how you identify as a Jew, no matter what your engagement in Jewish life.

Our spirit welcome flows from a belief in Audacious Hospitality, a transformative spiritual practice rooted in the belief that we will be a stronger, more vibrant Jewish community when we fully welcome and incorporate the diversity that is the reality of modern Jewish life and the pursuit of authentic Jewish identity.

Emanuel Congregation is a diverse congregation. We are proud to say that our diversity reflects the diversity of Chicago. But we've also learned that diversity is not the same as inclusion.

In the words of activist Verna Myers, "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance." ¹ *Chevrei*, if we want to tout diversity, we must actively choreograph the inclusive embrace of our diverse community and our diverse perspectives.

"We must walk toward discomfort," as Ms. Myers coaches--toward authentic relationships, deeper, closer connections, close enough to see the whole person: "It not about perfection; it's about connection"-- its about seeking people who can see our humanity; its about fashioning compassionate understanding that flows forth from friendship with people who are different from us. This is hachnasat orchim.

Consider this. According to Kabbalah, you and I and everyone come from the Adam Kadmon, the primordial person--God's "original intention" for humanity--celestial, androgynous, and the size of the entire universe. But then Adam Kadmon sinned, and God reduced the primordial person to the "flesh and blood, bifurcated and mortal creatures we are now." What this means is that every human soul is but a fragment of the collective soul that is Adam Kadmon. Every human soul comes from the *guf*, or the body, of the very first person.

Sources: BT Yevamot 62a, Folklorist Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 166ff

What this means spiritually is that we all come from the same soulful origin, no matter how different we manifest. And when we become aware of this, I borrow from Verna Myers' *midrash*, "Something really powerful and beautiful happens." We start to realize that they, those we see as different, they are us, that they are part of us, that they are us in our family; and when this understanding occurs, we cease to be bystanders, and

¹ A Harvard-trained lawyer and founder of The Vernā Myers Company, Verna Myers was recently made VP, Inclusion Strategy at Netflix. In this newly created role, she will help devise and implement strategies that integrate cultural diversity, inclusion and equity into all aspects of Netflix's operations worldwide. Check out Ms. Myers compelling Ted Talk https://www.ted.com/talks/verna_myers_how_to_overcome_our_biases_walk_boldly_toward_them/discussion.

we become actors, we become advocates, and we become allies.” What a beautiful vision of hachnasat orchim; what a beautiful vision of building an inclusive community.

The Call to Action

Ultimately, our journey through this pandemic wilderness must teach us about the power of hachnasat orchim. Our Tent of Meeting- whether physical or virtual must - must be welcoming and inclusive. Hachnasat orchim must flow from the disciplined practice of counting every single person as made in God’s image, full of intrinsic worth, and someone who matters. If our journey in the midbar is about authentic and genuine living, so is this pandemic. today ; Just like the desert, Hachnasat orchim is about growing and becoming who we are, at every stage of life, in relationship with one another.

We must encourage the creation of a culture of welcoming and acceptance and celebration and respect within our Jewish community mindfully inclusive of Jews of Color, Jews who identify as LGBTQ, Jews-By-Choice, intermarried couples together with their families.

Hachnasat orchim means to me personally as a white, heterosexual, cisgender person that I have to check my assumptions and biases that may preclude me from being as welcoming and inclusive as I think I am. And, I encourage you to embrace same responsibility

Hachnasat Orchim, audacious hospitality, must be at the root of our community, transforming it into a collective force for good that continuously builds on the relationality, the justice, the kindness, the matterness, and the spirituality of welcome. Shabbat shalom and many blessings to all! Stay well and struggle on! And get proximate!