Sermon for Rosh Hashanah Day 1, 5778 September 21, 2017
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Pluralism and its Discontents

"'Cast out that slave woman and her son!'"[1]

"The matter was evil in Abraham's eyes for it concerned his son."[2]

Who is right here? Sarah, who demands that Hagar and Ishmael be banished from the family's camp, never to return? Or Abraham, who sees this demand as "evil"? Sarah, who insists that Ishmael belongs to Hagar, that he is "her son"? Or Abraham, who claims Ishmael for his own, as "his son"? Different commentaries make cases for different sides. Rashi,[3] for example, following ancient rabbis, argues that Sarah has good reason to make her ultimatum. The Torah says she sees Ishmael "playing" – *m'tzaḥek* – but Rashi says that what she really sees is Ishmael acting cruelly, engaging in idolatry, and maybe even killing for sport. So Sarah is justified is in casting Ishmael out of the camp in order to protect the younger Isaac from his influence, and perhaps from real danger to his life. Ishmael has demonstrated that he is not a true son of Abraham but belongs solely to the "foreigner," Hagar. If Sarah had not demanded his ouster, she would have been abandoning Isaac to the dangers Ishmael posed.

Ibn Ezra,[4] on the other hand, supports Abraham's feeling that Sarah is being cruel and selfish. According to him, what Sarah sees is just what the Torah says: Ishmael playing like any other child. What motivates Sarah is not any danger to Isaac but rather the sudden realization that Ishmael and Isaac do not see any difference between themselves; they are simply two sons of the same father, brothers playing together. This equality clashes with Sarah's strongly-held view that Isaac outranks Ishmael, that only Isaac can inherit both the property and the mantle of Abraham. Remember that it was Sarah who insisted that Abraham have a child with Hagar in the first place. She could have welcomed Ishmael as her own, just as later in the Torah Rachel and Leah each welcome the children that their maidservants have with Jacob as their own children. Ishmael could have been "her son," Sarah's son. But Sarah makes a different choice. She disavows Ishmael and calls him "her son," Hagar's son. Sarah recognizes only Isaac as her own, and she sends Ishmael out of the camp to, it seems, almost certain death. Of course Abraham finds this to be "evil."

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[1] Genesis 21:10.
[2] Genesis 21:11.
[3] Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105 CE, France; the most famous medieval Torah commentator.
[4] Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, 1089-1167, Spain; another famous medieval Torah commentator who often disagreed with Rashi about the plain sense of the text.

As you all probably know, I am extremely dedicated to the idea of pluralism. Yes, that is an understatement. As an anthropologist, I know how extraordinarily vast the range of human variation can be, and I committed ten years of my life to trying to understand people who were so different from me that I could barely grasp how they saw the world. But, despite our huge differences and the yawning gaps and lack of comprehension that stood between us, we connected as human beings on many, many levels. I could see my close friends in south India upholding what I saw as an unjust social hierarchy that demeaned other people and kept them permanently poor and uneducated, and I could disagree with them with every fiber of my being, and I could still love them. As a Jew, I believe to my core that the diversity of this world was intentionally created by God. Difference is God's plan for the universe, something we have to strive to remember on this day that celebrates the birthday of the world. When we deny or debase the differences between us; when we use those differences to create social, economic, and racial injustice; when we argue that some kinds of people are blessed by God and some are cursed; and when we say that some are worthy of love and others are only worthy of hate, then we create a rent in the fabric of humanity, we stop our ears to the Torah's teachings, and we deny God. And as the person blessed to serve as the rabbi of this very pluralistic community, I am entirely committed to the model of honoring diversity that Germantown Jewish Centre represents. I have seen how we can disagree on so many things that are deeply rooted in our hearts – from prayer to Torah, from the Israeli peace process to U.S. politics, from the path of goodness to the nature of God – and still, we can sit together respectfully, we can talk with each other civilly, and we can love and support each other through all of the ups and downs of our lives. Pluralism really is at the core of my life.

BUT… I have been struggling within myself over the past year. I want to hold fast to my belief in the value of pluralism. I never want to give that up. But I have been shaken by the events of the past year. I have to ask this question, almost against my will: Is it possible that pluralism can go too far? Because, my friends, it really seems that it has. Is there a place in a pluralistic society for those who portray all immigrants as rapists, criminals, terrorists, and murderers? Is there a place for those who heap vitriol on Muslims, on transgender people, on women? And is there a place for white supremacists, racists, anti-Semites, marching with torches through a college campus and loudly proclaiming their hate? Is each of these really just another group, just another ingredient in the salad bowl of America? Are their opinions really just another set of points of view that must be set alongside differing opinions and weighed and discussed and debated? Is there really, in that infamous phrase, "blame on both sides"? Going back to our Torah reading, are Sarah and Abraham's points of view really just alternative readings of the same situation? Is there no moral scale on which these arguments can be weighed and their merits judged?

I believe so deeply in pluralism, in our capacity to understand and even to appreciate diametrically opposed points of view. But I find that I have now become one of pluralism's discontents.[5] I am deeply troubled by the elevation of hateful points of view, as if all views were equal and all were legitimate, simply because some people articulate them. This is not the pluralism I believe in, the pluralism to which I have dedicated my life. There has to be a limit, a limit to pluralism. But if pluralism is to have limits, what are they? How are we to set its boundaries? What do we do about those who violate those boundaries? And who gets to decide?

You know the joke about the congregation that's having a big argument? Everyone has split into two camps. Both sides think they are right; no, they know that they are right and the other side is wrong. It doesn't matter what the issue is; you can make up the issue. The important thing is that they're paralyzed; they can't reconcile their differences, so they can't do anything. Finally, they manage to agree on one thing: they'll go ask the old rabbi emeritus. He's a bazillion years old. Surely he'll tell them who's right. "Rabbi," says one side, "tell us the truth – we're right, aren't we?" The rabbi thinks for a second, then nods his head. "You're right!" The other side is horrified. "But Rabbi, they're completely wrong! We're right! Right?" The rabbi hesitates, then nods his head a second time. "You're right!" "But Rabbi," says the poor, beleaguered president, "they can't both be right!" "Hmm," says the rabbi. He furrows his brow, he thinks for a few minutes. Then he brightens up and says, "You know what? You're right!"

I used to identify most deeply with the two sides to this dispute and the answers they get from the rabbi. Surely there is something true about each of their positions, something that can lead the rabbi to see the way in which each of them is right. This happens all the time in the Talmud. Two ancient sages articulate completely opposing points of view on a matter of law. But, in the eyes of the Talmud, these are both great scholars. Is it really possible that they disagree so passionately? The Talmud then explains the logic that has led each of them to their opposite conclusions, the *savara*, the reasoning, that makes each position plausible. And the reader sighs with relief. "A-ha! I knew there had to be an explanation." And the world makes sense again. The ancient rabbis go even further in the midrash, when they articulate the concept of *d'var aher* – "another idea." Why does the Torah say such and so? Rabbi Meir says X. Then, *d'var aher,* another idea, Rabbi Akiva says Y. And even, *d'var aher*, another idea, Rabbi

[5] Compare with Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents, in which he argues that the very qualities of civilization that we value – for example, restraining our violent impulses – inevitably create discontent in individuals when their desires are thwarted. Here I am arguing that the very qualities of pluralism that we value – for example, legitimating marginal points of view – can create discontent in individuals when their moral instinct to judge between views is thwarted.

Tarfon says not-X or not-Y. Is Rabbi Meir right? Yes. Is Rabbi Akiva right? Of course. Is even Rabbi Tarfon right?? Do you have to ask?

But here, in this little joke, someone does have the temerity to ask. And this is the part I'm identifying with now most deeply, the rabbi's last answer. Ok, the first group is right, in a way. And the second group, the one that absolutely opposes them, is right, in a way. But when push comes to shove, when it really comes down to something important, something that has big consequences for justice, for equality, for the way human beings are treated in the world, they can't both be right! I mean, can they? Can they, rabbi? And the rabbi says, "You know what? You're right."

The ancient rabbis teach that Rosh Hashanah marks the anniversary of the sixth day of creation, the day on which human beings were made.[6] We read in the Torah that on this very day, "God created man in God's image, in the divine image God created him; male and female God created them."[7] The rabbis pick up on those words – "male and female" – and explain that when God created the first human, God actually created a single being with two genders and two faces. Only later was this complex being separated into two parts.[8] In other words, humanity, from the very beginning, was created plural, diverse, containing difference even within its single form. This reading of the creation story undermines the hierarchy that can otherwise be read into the origins of man and woman. Instead of woman being subordinate to man because she was created from a small part of man, the genders were created equal simply by dividing the primordial being in half. The lesson? Difference does not have to imply hierarchy. The story of Adam and Eve's children, Cain and Abel, makes the same point in another way. The two boys are very different from each other, one raising plants and the other animals, one quiet and one impulsive. But when Abel's offering to God is accepted and Cain's rejected, Cain refuses to accept that this is simply a case of difference, difference with no load, just a plain, ordinary difference between them. For Cain, this difference must fit into a hierarchy, and even worse, a hierarchy that puts Cain below Abel. When Cain responds with murderous rage, killing his brother, God punishes him severely. The message seems clear: difference is part of God's plan for humanity, and it must be honored, not attacked, preserved, not eliminated.

Things change, though, as the Torah moves on to other stories. When God looks at the earth in the time of Noah, God does not merely see different points of view at work. There is no "blame on both sides" here. Instead, God is crystal clear: the vast

[6] Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 23:1.
[7] Genesis 1:27.
[8] Midrash Bereshit Rabah 8:1. The midrash understands Genesis 2:21, which is usually translated, "God took one of his [Adam's] ribs" to make Eve, as "God took one of its [the first human's] sides" to make two separate beings, man and woman, Adam and Eve.

majority of human beings have become not just different but evil. Noah's point of view is right, and everyone else is wrong. And God's response is not subtle either; other than Noah and his family, all of humanity is destroyed. When we read the story of the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt, Pharaoh is not just a free thinker with a different opinion than Moses. He is clearly in the wrong, and his hard heart doesn't even allow him to change his mind once the stark consequences of disobeying God start to become clear. Egypt is destroyed and thousands of its people and even its animals die. In these stories, as in many others in the Bible, it is made very clear that not all points of view are acceptable, that not all decisions are susceptible to debate. As Israelis like to say: *Yesh g'vul!* – "There is a limit!" But what, exactly, is that limit? And how do we, without the benefit of divine intervention, find it?

In my own searching for ways to answer this question, to balance my strong commitment to pluralism with my growing feelings of discontent, I've found two principles of Torah that I think point the way forward, so I want to share those with you today. First, let's go back to that sixth day of creation, the one that we commemorate today, the day that God creates human beings. "God created man in God's image, in the divine image God created him; male and female God created them."[9] Unique among all that God makes, human beings are described as being created *b'tzelem Elohim* – "in God's image." This somewhat strange idea – that humans somehow carry the image of God, whatever that could mean – became a very important reference point in Jewish law. If every single human being is a *tzelem Elohim* – an image of God – then our treatment of each other becomes a mirror of how we treat the divine. All sorts of ways in which we are required to treat everyone –not just people who are like us or people whom we happen to like or even people whom we judge worthy, but everyone – flow from this concept of *tzelem Elohim*. Why are we prohibited from cheating each other in buying and selling? *Tzelem Elohim*. Why must we provide for the poor, the homeless, and the stranger? *Tzelem Elohim*. And why must we help those whose lives are at risk, not simply stand by as their blood is shed? *Tzelem Elohim*. If every human being is an indescribably precious creation made in the image of God, then how we treat them, how we talk about them, and how we think about them all testify to our belief in a moral standard in the universe. Or, on the contrary, how we treat and speak and think about others can bear shattering testimony to the bankruptcy of our claims to morality.

Here, in *tzelem Elohim*, we find the limit of pluralism. This principle of Torah allows us to distinguish between legitimate disagreements and illegitimate ones, and between reasonable courses of action and acts that cross the line. If our speech about others pays tribute to the divine image that each and every human being bears – even those with whom we disagree or those whom we dislike – then it is legitimately within the boundaries of pluralism. If our actions toward others treat them with the respect

[9] Genesis 1:27.

and dignity that we would accord an indescribably precious being – even when we are opposing them – then they are legitimately within the boundaries of pluralism. But when we denigrate and disparage others, when we attack them out of hate and deny them their humanity, then we have gone too far. Then there is no legitimate debate. Not all views are equal, and not all are deserving of being seriously considered, and the Torah, in describing the very creation of humanity, gives us the ability to make those important distinctions.

So far, so good; the principle of *tzelem Elohim* addresses one side of my discontent with pluralism. The idea of humanity being created in the image of God helps us find a moral basis on which to distinguish between points of view, allowing us to avoid the slide into radical relativism and to reassert our capacity for judgment. But there is a dangerous potential consequence to exercising our judgment in this way: it could lead us to simply cut off those whose viewpoints don't pass this test, to refuse to interact or even speak with them, confident that we are morally in the right. This is exactly what is happening in the U.S. today, where we are all increasingly separated from those who don't agree with us. We live in different neighborhoods, send our children to different schools, consume different sources of news, and create distinct social universes around ourselves – whether in person or online – where we never have to encounter anyone who doesn't share our point of view. And it's not only happening in this country; we see the same phenomenon in countries around the world, including in Israel. When we were on sabbatical in Haifa during the last Israeli political campaign, the joke going around was that everyone in liberal Tel Aviv woke up the morning after the election and was shocked, shocked to find that Likud had won the most seats and that Bibi Netanyahu was the new prime minister. "How could that possibly have happened?!" they asked each other. "No one I know voted for him!"

To help us not simply disengage from those with whom we disagree – even if we are sure that we are on firm moral ground – we need a second principle of Torah, one that we rarely talk about in depth, although we will read it right here on Yom Kippur afternoon. Here's how the Torah puts it:

> You shall not hate your brother in your heart; rebuke your kinsman, but incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your neighbor, but love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.[10]

This is a complex statement, one that requires and deserves unpacking. It starts with something we should be very familiar with as we drive around this neighborhood, where it shows up on signs everywhere: an admonition against hate. It's easy to say "Hate Has No Home Here," but as critics have pointed out, some of those whose lawns sport the

[10] Leviticus 19:17-18.

sign only want to protect certain kinds of people from hate; other people, they might argue, are in fact deserving of hate because of the opinions they hold. The Torah offers a different point of view. In the eyes of the ancient rabbis, nothing is more dangerous and nothing more corrosive to human society than hate, and they don't distinguish between different types or objects of hatred; all hate is toxic. As we know too well, hate can blind people to what is in front of them, to the basic humanity of those they oppose, to the divine image in each human being, and in that way it can lead well-meaning people just like you and me to commit terrible atrocities, as the Jewish people has experienced painfully in imperial Rome, in inquisitional Spain, in Nazi Germany, and in far too many other places. Hate is not the way, not for any of us. Hate can destroy, but it cannot build. We must keep hate far from our hearts if we are to have any hope of preserving our society and our world.

Luckily, the Torah offers not only an admonition against hate but also a method for eliminating it from our hearts, and it's called in Hebrew *tochechah,* which is often translated as "rebuke," but I might translate it instead as "critical engagement." "Rebuke your kinsman," the Torah instructs us, a positive commandment that we engage rather than separate from those with whom we disagree. The rabbis teach that by channeling our disagreements with others into speech, by addressing them directly, and by calling out the faults we see in what they say and do, we can short-circuit the human tendency to hate and keep our hearts clear, even when we are loudly expressing our firmly-held differences. A crucial limit on *tochechah* comes in the second half of the verse: "…but incur no guilt because of him." The Talmud interprets this to mean that when we engage in *tochechah*, we offer our rebuke in ways that can be heard, with as much gentleness and respect and even love as we can manage, while still getting our criticism across.[11]

Balancing the obligation to critically engage with others with the need to do so respectfully is an immense challenge in the public sphere, and in the last year we have seen both wonderful examples of people marching and demonstrating with positive messages and horrific examples of hatred and violence masquerading as political speech and claiming moral equivalence. So we know that engaging in *tochechah* in a way that preserves civil discourse in a very polarized environment is both necessary and very, very hard. But it is even harder to do this kind of critical engagement face-to-face in our communities, in our circles of friends and family, in our own homes. Having the courage to lift up our voices is hard enough, but doing it in the context of loving relationships, disagreeing vehemently with love and respect? That is so difficult that I have spoken to many people in the past year who tell me they have shied away from such conversations and even stopped visiting family because of their disagreements, and I understand why.

[11] See, for example, Babylonian Talmud Erechin 16b.

But the *mitzvah* of *tochechah* does not give us a pass; it requires us to open our mouths and try.

The consequences of not doing so, of staying silent while our principles are trashed and our values flouted, while we and others who belong to marginalized groups are denigrated and dehumanized, while rights are ignored and inequality and injustice flourish, are just too dire. And while the consequences for our society of us remaining silent are bad, the consequences for our souls are perhaps even worse. That is the gist of the next line in the Torah, where it says, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your neighbor." If we stay silent, the rabbis teach, our pain and anger will not simply disappear. Instead, they will simmer and boil inside us, causing us to harbor grudges against those whom we should have rebuked and engendering within us a desire for vengeance, which will inevitably lead to social calamity and perhaps even collapse. Maimonides teaches about *tochechah*, "It alone makes civilized life and social interaction possible."[12] So I want to make a deal with you. I am not going to stand here and tell you what candidate to vote for or which political party to support. My obligation here is to be a representative of Torah, and Torah is pretty silent on that point. But I will do my best this year to continue to raise my voice in *tochechah* to attack moral failures that I see happening in our city and our country, and I will also applaud moral courage where I can find it. And I want to encourage you to do the same, even when it's hard, especially when it's hard. We can do this together, respectfully and civilly, in a way that spreads love and not hate. At the Bregman lecture on Yom Kippur afternoon, we're going to hear from Chris Satullo about how to create the environment of civil discourse that we need in order to do this in our synagogue community, and then we're actually going to do it in several programs throughout the year, organized by our Tikkun Olam Coordinating Team. I urge you all to come and try this together.

The passage we have been looking at about *tochechah* ends with maybe the most famous phrase in the Torah, "Love your neighbor as yourself," which I think here articulates not a stand-alone principle but the ultimate dream we hold for ourselves and the world. If we can manage to keep hate far from our hearts, if we can courageously express our criticism of others with respect and caring, if we can break out of our silence so that we are not bearing grudges or thoughts of vengeance in our souls, then maybe, just maybe, we might be able to look at others with the same eyes through which we would want to be seen. This is a radical redefinition of what we mean by pluralism. It doesn't mean staying silent to create peace or in the name of love, and it doesn't mean passive acceptance of those with whom you disagree. It means always treating people as if they are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the divine image. And it means actively and critically engaging with them when we disagree, not in the name of hate or conflict, but in the name of love, using *tochechah* – not passivity – as an antidote to hate. The

[12] Mishneh Torah Hilchot De'ot 7:12.

ancient rabbis teach, "Love without *tochechah* is not love. Peace without *tochechah* is not peace."[13]

Imagine how the conflict between Sarah and Abraham could have gone differently. Imagine if, in addition to following God's instruction to listen to Sarah's voice,[14] Abraham had also raised his own. What if he had pushed himself not to remain silent but instead to critically and with love lay out his sense of the injustice of banishing Hagar and Ishmael? What if Sarah and Abraham had talked for hours, sometimes with raised voices, sometimes through tears? What could have gone differently between them, and between Isaac and Ishmael, and between their children and their children's children? What injustices could have been averted? What pathways to peace could have opened up? How could love have replaced hate? Abraham remains silent, and we can't reach back into the story and open his mouth for him. But we can open our own, here and now, and push ourselves to stand for love, to stand for justice, and to stand for peace. *Ken y'hi ratzon* – may this be God's will for us this year.

L'shanah tovah.

[13] Genesis Rabah 54:3.
[14] Genesis 21:12.