

Boundaries that Unite: Exploring The Sacred In Community

Rabbi K'vod Wieder

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A member of our board of trustees sent me this joke:

A man who has finally made it in business treats himself to a new Lamborghini.

After buying it, he feels guilty so he goes to the Orthodox Rabbi and asks for a mezuzah for the Lamborghini.

"You want a mezuzah for what?" the Rabbi asks.

"It's a Lamborghini,"

"What's a Lamborghini?" asks the Rabbi.

"A sports car."

"What? That's blasphemy!" the Rabbi shouts. "You want a mezuzah for a sports car? Go to the Conservatives!"

Well, the man is disappointed, but goes to the Conservative Rabbi and asks for a mezuzah.

"You want a mezuzah for what?" the Rabbi asks.

"For my Lamborghini", the man replies.

"What's a Lamborghini?" asks the Rabbi.

"A car, a sports car."

"What kind of sports car?" asks the Rabbi.

"Italian."

“What? That is blasphemy!” the Rabbi shouts. “You want a mezuzah for a Goyishe car? Go to the Reform!”

Again, the man feels guilty and disappointed, but goes to the Reform Rabbi.

“Rabbi,” he asks, “I’d like a mezuzah for my Lamborghini.”

“You have a Lamborghini?” asks the Rabbi.

“You know what it is?” says the man.

“Of course! It’s a fantastic Italian sports car. What’s a mezuzah?”

While this joke make many of us laugh because of the stereotypes around the different denominations in Judaism, it is worth examining how our internalizations of those stereotypes create challenges for us as a community.

Temple Beth El is among the “handful” of dually affiliated congregations in the country and what we’ve created over the past 7 years since the merger with Congregation Eilat is incredible. Not only do we offer diverse options of Jewish practice and perspective, many of us have built meaningful relationships with each other so that we are truly one community. However, our community still struggles with understanding the difference between Reform and Conservative practices and many have planted themselves firmly in one identity in a way that separates and divides from the other. As a dually affiliated congregation, let’s get clear on who Temple Beth El is. Both Reform and Conservative movements are

“progressive” Jewish movements – meaning that our understanding of Jewish tradition is that it has always adapted to meet the social reality and needs of the current generation. Both movements encourage the participation and leadership of women, LGBTQ, people with disabilities, and other expressions of our diversity. Both movements are committed to supporting a democratic and religiously pluralistic state of Israel.

Historically, the difference between the two movements have been how we approach and actualize prayer and ritual – with Reform prayer commonly having less Hebrew and liturgy and Conservative ritual and prayer, less creativity. In the past 15 years, both movements have changed their approaches in this regard. In the 1999 Pittsburgh platform, the Reform movement officially declared their commitment to learning Hebrew to not only connect us with Israel, but for it to be a greater part of our study and ritual. Over 60% of Conservative congregations in the United States use musical instruments and creative approaches to services and these new approaches have been shared at national conventions. These developments are all attempts to create meaningful and accessible sacred space.

On Rosh Hashanah, we spoke about our tradition’s vision of our people to be prophets. But, being a Jew also means to be, as stated in the book of Exodus, a *mamlechet kohanim* - a kingdom of priests. For most of us, whether we are doctors, accountants, engineers, students, or gardeners, the last thing we would call ourselves is “priests.” Here, the Torah’s vision

transcends profession, but instead sees our roles as creators of sacred space. Creating sacred space means intentionally designating physical spaces or moments in time as experiences of being connected with each other and the Divine reality greater than us.

In biblical times, sacred space happened in a particular geographic place - first the tabernacle in the desert and then in the Temple in Jerusalem. The traditional Torah reading for this morning invites us to imagine the *Kohen Gadol* - the high priest who was about to enter the Holy of Holies. Take a moment, and imagine - you are the high priest. It is Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year and the true burden of the entire people is on your shoulders. What is about to happen in the next few hours will determine whether you and the people will be forgiven for all your imperfections and limitations, or die. It's the moment of truth and you have to be in the right head space to meet the Infinite Presence. You immerse in a natural body of water, you burn incense, the Levites play music to focus you and get you in the space of total openness, total humility. You get ready to enter the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber. Think about how aware you are, how open to connection, how unpreoccupied you are with the small details of life in this moment. This piece of Torah invites us to take the creation of sacred space seriously.

Now fast forward over a thousand years later from the Bible. The Jewish sages of the first century did something radical. They said that one's dinner table should be a sacred space. They created blessings and ritual in the home to ensure that families would be aware of the image of God in each other and the ways they are connected. They transformed the role of the priest beyond an officiant in the Temple and instead something that every member of the tribe was called upon to express.

Being a priest means that we don't just succumb to the tyranny of our schedules, the popular values of consumerism and materialism, and the endless pull of email and social media. It means that we set boundaries in our lives to mark space as holy and sacred. Boundaries can include no phones at the dinner table, lighting Shabbat candles, or giving Tzedakah around the Holy days. It can mean taking a few moments before we start the day in the morning for meditation or prayer. These decisions and boundaries we create can allow for conversations and connections to happen that root us in our deepest values. They open us to be present to what is most meaningful about our life journeys as individuals and being part of the Jewish people.

Many of us set these kinds of boundaries in our lives to preserve what is important to us. Many of us are clear that on our death beds, we are not going to say "I wish I spent more time at the office." But many of us do not

avail ourselves of the wisdom of our Jewish tradition to guide us in setting those boundaries because “no one is going to tell us what to do,” or it’s just not part of our identities as cultural, secular Jews, or it seems so distant from our day to day lives that we can’t see a way of bringing Jewish ritual into our lives that is authentic to who we are.

I think that our identities as Reform or Conservative all revolve around our relationship to ritual boundaries and is very misunderstood. Many people think that Conservative means more boundaries and Reform means less. Some people fear that Conservative element of our congregation means more restrictions, and that the Reform element means watering down the substance and depth of our tradition. Nothing could be further from the truth. People may be surprised to hear that most of our Conservative members do not keep kosher in their homes and do not go to synagogue regularly on Shabbat, and that our weekly Torah study attendees are almost exclusively Reform members.

At Temple Beth El, we are committed to having our ritual practices reflect the diverse needs of our community. Our Jewish Life and Ritual Committee have articulated 5 values that guide all our choices around prayer and ritual. These five values are both fully Reform and fully Conservative. They are “audacious Hospitality, spirituality, tradition, accessibility, and participation.”

Some of our prayer spaces and rituals will emphasize some of these values more than others and by experimenting with the different things we offer, each one of us will be able to find the environment here at Temple Beth El that helps us connect to the mystery and wonder of life.

While I was ordained at a Conservative seminary and am identified as a Conservative Jew, in my six and a half years of serving Temple Beth El, I've also learned that I am a Reform Jew. I am a Reform Jew, because I believe that each individual needs to decide what boundaries are right for them in expressing and living their Jewish identity. These can include traditional Jewish forms, but also new and creative expressions of what it means to be Jewish.

I am a Conservative Jew because I am committed to living my life in relationship to Jewish law and practice and I believe our tradition has wisdom in guiding us to setting boundaries in our lives to experience our values, holiness, and spirituality. Neither of these reasons are exclusively Reform or Conservative. Ultimately, I am a Jew who wants to live a life of deeper connection and meaning, and I find that my Jewish teachings, traditions, and community are wise and flexible enough to help guide in that quest in this crazy 21st century world that we live in.

A story that illustrates the flexibility of ritual boundaries and what they protect:

The great 18th century spiritual master, the Baal Shem Tov asked heaven to show him the reward that would be given to someone who observed Shabbat in the most exalted way. So Heaven took the Baal Shem up to the highest place in Gan Eden, where even the angels were forbidden to go. And there he saw two golden thrones, shining with light.

The Baal Shem asked, "Whose thrones are these?"

And he was told, "One is for you, if you are wise. And one is for another person you must find..."

The Baal Shem immediately set out to find the person who would be his neighbor in Heaven. His magic carriage led him to a large non-Jewish city in front of a small house on the edge of town. The Baal Shem knocked on the door, and when a man came out, the Rebbe looked at him in surprise. He didn't have a beard, or sidelocks, and there was no yarmulke on his head. He didn't even look Jewish and there was no mezuzah on his door.

Very puzzled, the Baal Shem said, "My dearest friend, we've traveled a long distance to visit your area. Could we by any chance stay with you for a few days?"

The man agreed, and throughout their stay, the Baal Shem watched the man carefully. He was a perfect host. He gave them the best room, and generally

attended to all their needs. But he never prayed, didn't keep kosher, was not religious, maybe even wasn't Jewish. This man was going to sit next to him on High? "Maybe he's a lamed-vav tsaddik, a hidden holy person," the Rebbe thought. "Tomorrow is Shabbat. Maybe he'll reveal his true exalted level..."

But the man didn't keep Shabbat in any way. He didn't pray, he didn't make Kiddush, and worst of all, he had a big party on Friday night. He and his friends ate and drank. They smoked, played music, sang and danced. In a nutshell, they broke every possible law of Shabbat, making it impossible for the Baal Shem to pray with his usual deep concentration or have his usual Shabbat feast.

Saturday night, as he prepared to leave, the Baal Shem decided he had to find out what was going on here. So he said to his host, "My sweetest friend, you've been so very kind. But I wonder...I hope you won't mind...could I ask you one question? You and your friends were celebrating so much Friday night. Was there some special reason for your party?"

"Holy Rebbe," the man answered. "I know you could never tell by looking at me, but the truth is, I'm a Jew. I was taken from my family when I was young and while I have very few memories of my family, there was one thing I always remembered: my father telling me that Shabbat is a time to celebrate with utmost joy. And I remember our house was always filled with guests on Shabbat..."

Now I'm not really a rich man, so I make do with cheap simple food during the week. I save my money for Shabbat. On Friday night, I invite a lot of guests, just like my father used to do, and I have a big party. I serve the best foods, the best wines, and we celebrate in the happiest possible way..."

The Baal Shem looked at the man: "Gevalt, what an exalted Shabbat this man has! Knowing none of the laws, and living here all alone, he still receives the inside of the inside of Shabbat...the light, the joy. How could I not have seen it before? What a true Jewish heart he has, what a deep Jewish soul!"

The he had another thought. "This man really wants to live like a Jew. But he doesn't know how. What if I showed him the way a Jew is actually supposed to observe Shabbat? His Shabbat, as beautiful as it is, isn't complete because he only knows one half, the light and the joy. If I taught him about the other half, how to keep Shabbat according to the law, then surely his Shabbat would be on an even higher level..."

So the Baal Shem opened his mouth to teach the Yid some Torah. But to his amazement, no words came out. It was as if something was preventing him from speaking. And then, in his mind, he heard a voice that said, "Holy Baal Shem Tov, think about what you are about to do. It's true that your intentions are the highest. You want to help this simple man become a better Jew. You want his Shabbat to be whole according to your view. But don't you see? He believes that by having his

party, he is celebrating the Shabbat and carrying on his father's tradition. And this belief fills him with utmost happiness.

What do you think would happen to this man if he found out that really he has been doing everything wrong – that instead of honoring Shabbat, he is desecrating it? What do you think would happen to his pure heartfelt joy? Is it worth it, at this stage in his life and given his circumstance, to teach him the laws of Shabbat – if by doing so you destroy his spirit and take away his greatest source of joy?”

So the Baal Shem simply thanked the man again for his hospitality, and knowing that he would spend eternity with this beautiful soul in the highest heaven, smiled, climbed into his wagon and drove away.

Each one of us has the opportunity to discover the boundaries of the sacred that are right for us, that speak to our individual *neshamot* – souls. We hope that our clergy, leadership, and community at Temple Beth El can accompany you on this journey of discovery, and our variety of Jewish expressions will be viewed, not as divisive to each other, but as sacred opportunities to enrich our lives.