

"In Divisive Times..."
by Rabbi Judith Kummer
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A moment of levity:

The rabbi came to visit the other day. He said that at my advanced age I should be thinking of the hereafter.

I told him, "Oh, I do, all the time. No matter where I am — in the living room, upstairs, in the kitchen, or down in the basement, I am always asking myself: 'Now, what am I here after?'"

My friends,

I'd like to tell you a story — and it's a story that seems to me to be very relevant to our time. It has a long prologue and then leads into the drama.

During World War II, as many of us know, one of the bloodiest battles fought in the Pacific was the famous battle at Iwo Jima.

Now, Iwo Jima was a small volcanic island pockmarked by caves, and 70,000 American marines fought an untold number of defending Japanese soldiers there. This was a place that would see 26,000 Americans die. There were more American deaths on Iwo Jima than among the defending Japanese — and this was the only time that that imbalance occurred in the entirety of the Pacific war.

Iwo Jima is known, of course because of the famous image now gracing the Marine Corps war memorial in Washington DC, of a group of marines struggling to raise the American flag atop Mt. Suribachi on the island.

But the bitter military battle fought on that soil for physical control of the area was not the only battle around Iwo Jima that became famous even after the end of the war.

When the fighting ceased, the Marine Corps needed to bury its dead. As reported in an article from the journal of the American Jewish Historical Society,

Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn was the first Jewish chaplain the Marine Corps ever

appointed, and he had been assigned to the Fifth Marine Division, where there were approximately 1,500 Jewish Marines.

"Rabbi Gittelsohn was in the thick of the fray, ministering to Marines of all faiths in the combat zone. He shared the fear, horror and despair of the fighting men, each of whom knew that each day might be his last. Rabbi Gittelsohn's tireless efforts to comfort the wounded and encourage the fearful [would later win] him three service ribbons.

When the fighting was over, the Division Chaplain Warren Cuthriell, a Protestant minister, asked Rabbi Gittelsohn to deliver the memorial sermon at a combined religious service dedicating the Marine Cemetery. Rev. Cuthriell wanted all the fallen Marines – black and white, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish — [to be] honored in a single, nondenominational ceremony.

Unfortunately, racial and religious prejudice was strong in the Marine Corps, as it was throughout America [at that time.] According to Rabbi Gittelsohn, the majority of Christian chaplains objected to having a rabbi preach over predominantly Christian graves...."

To his credit, the Division Chaplain refused to alter his plans for a single interfaith service to dedicate the Marine cemetery. Rabbi Gittelsohn, on the other hand, wanted to save his minister friend further embarrassment, and so he accepted the ultimate decision to have 3 separate services.

"...At the Jewish memorial service to a congregation of [only] 70 or so who attended, Rabbi Gittelsohn delivered the powerful eulogy he [had] originally [written to deliver at the large] combined service.

[Here is an excerpt from his soaring, beautiful prose dedicating the Marine cemetery:]

'...Here lie men who loved America because their ancestors generations ago helped in her founding, and other men who loved her with equal passion because they themselves or their own fathers escaped from oppression to her blessed shores. Here lie officers and men, Negroes and whites, rich men and poor . . . together. Here are Protestants, Catholics, and Jews together. Here no man prefers another because of his faith or despises him because of his color. Here there are no quotas of how many from each group are admitted or allowed. Among these men, there is no discrimination. No prejudice. No hatred. Theirs is the highest and purest democracy...

Whosoever of us lifts his hand in hate against a brother, or who thinks himself superior to those who happen to be in the minority, makes of this ceremony and the bloody sacrifice it commemorates, an empty, hollow

mockery. To this, then, as our solemn, sacred duty do we the living now dedicate ourselves: to the right of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, of white men and Negroes alike, to enjoy the democracy for which all of them have here paid the price....

We here solemnly swear that this shall not be in vain. Out of this and from the suffering and sorrow of those who mourn this will come, we promise, the birth of a new freedom for the sons of men everywhere....”

Now here's where the story takes off. Among Rabbi Gittlesohn's listeners were 3 Protestant chaplains who were so upset by the close-mindedness and bigotry that their colleagues had voiced that they ended up boycotting their own Protestant service. One of these Protestant chaplains got hold of the text of Rabbi Gittlesohn's eulogy, and unbeknownst to the rabbi, this Protestant chaplain distributed several thousand copies of Rabbi Gittlesohn's talk to his regiment!

As the American Jewish Historical Society reports, “some Marines enclosed the copies in letters to their families. An avalanche of coverage resulted. Time magazine published excerpts, which wire services spread even further. The entire sermon was inserted into the Congressional Record, the Army released the eulogy for short-wave broadcast to American troops throughout the world, and radio commentator Robert St. John read it on his program and on many succeeding Memorial Days.” Clearly, this is the WWII equivalent of a meme going viral today!

Rabbi Gittelsohn later reflected, “I have often wondered whether anyone would ever have heard of my Iwo Jima sermon had it not been for the bigoted attempt to ban it.”

My friends, that kind of bigotry was truly appalling —although some good clearly came from the reactions to it.

But sadly, that kind of bigotry did not end in Rabbi Gittlesohn's time in the Marine Corps. That bigotry is still with us today, clearly visible in the rise of anti-Semitic actions in our country during these recent years, in the higher rates of black incarceration throughout the US -- and we know that systemic racism leads to economic and healthcare inequality and even to inequality in COVID infection and death rates.

And what's even more disturbing, my friends, is that so many people don't even think there's anything wrong with these prejudices and inequalities. Not only has our country seen an alarming rise in right-wing extremism of late, there are also folks we might consider more middle-of-the-road who would like very much not to see things change

dramatically in our society, even if it means keeping huge groups of folks clearly at a disadvantage.

In my opinion, in the year 2020 in the United States, we should not need a Black Lives Matter movement—because Black lives, like all human lives in our country, should be valued and respected. But this is not the case.

When an unarmed black man ends up with an officer's knee on his neck for more than 8 minutes, when a young black woman sleeping peacefully in her own apartment is gunned down by police, when untold numbers of other injustices happen to people of color that would not have happened to people who are white, it is clear that bigotry of many forms is indeed alive and well in the US in the year 2020.

And when those in power make comments that are dismissive of anyone trying to change the status quo, or when troops are sent in to quell what had been peaceful gatherings to object to systemic racism, there is no question that there are huge obstacles to any progress.

So what can we do to help change this? If we Jews, with our teachings from Rabbi Hillel of "*im ayn anee lee, mee lee*— If I am not for myself, who am I? — *Uk'she anee l'atzmi, ma anee*— If I am *only* for myself, what am I?" — if we Jews cannot take up the mantle, if we aren't willing to see how important it is that we take action in this fight, around this issue, then there isn't a lot of hope for what might happen to *us* also in this society.

I have a feeling most of us are familiar with the famous quote by Martin Niemoller,
"First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out — because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me — and there was no one left to speak for me."

There is no doubt that we need to stand up for each other in order for our society to function at its healthiest.

Now I want to be clear here, that I am not advocating for differences to go away, but for each of us to be treated fairly no matter our identity, no matter the differences between us, whether these are differences of race or class or gender or age. I'm not thinking of what sociologists

would term a “melting pot” — where group identities grow less distinct to the point of disappearing altogether — but rather the model of the “tossed salad,” where we each retain our own identity— and where we would be celebrated for what makes us unique.

Coming together across lines of distinction then can become a holy act, where we recognize the power of difference, the power of the uniqueness of each individual and the strength we find in respectful connection.

I am very fond of the writing of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former chief Rabbi of Britain. As Rabbi Sacks wrote, “We encounter God in the face of a stranger. That, I believe, is the Hebrew Bible’s single greatest and most counterintuitive contribution to ethics. God creates difference; therefore it is in one-who-is-different that we meet God. Abraham encounters God when he invites three strangers into his tent.”

What causes us to shy away from connecting with others who are different? I happen to feel that it’s a gift to be able to look at the world through each other’s eyes — but I think that what causes a lot of us to shy away from doing that is fear.

Some people feel fearful that they might be seen as weak if they don’t hold onto their own perspective tenaciously and insist that it is the only way to see the world.

Others may experience almost an existential fear; in coming together with people who are different, and in granting them credence or space or validity in the world, they themselves might disappear, might be obliterated. I am thinking of the fair housing struggles of the 1960’s and the incredible effort it took to allow one black family to move in on a suburban street — and how terrified the white neighbors were that if they allowed this to happen, they would end up losing their whole neighborhood. On a most basic level, there was a clear fear being expressed that they would be wiped out, would disappear completely.

Now, some people might be fearful — and some might just be too busy with the efforts of everyday living to want to take on the task of trying to see the world through someone else’s eyes and come together across lines of division; some people may be too busy and too tired and too overwhelmed with what’s going on in the world, and they just don’t have the energy to engage.

So, the question arises: what can we do to get beyond the bitter divisiveness we know in the world around us at this point? Is there anything we can do to quell fear and to overcome lethargy?

Taking some action can definitely help. And the place to start taking action is where it's closest to home: inside of ourselves. If we had the courage — and I challenge each of us to engage in this, at least a bit — we could begin a process of developing some self-awareness of our unconscious bias. We need to look at our own unwitting, unconscious prejudices, those fears that are so deeply embedded that they feel like they are part of us. I'm thinking of that instinct many of us have learned to cross the street when we see someone in the dark in a hoodie, or — for those of us who are Caucasian — that learned instinct to hold one's bag or briefcase more tightly when in a space with someone of color. As an African-American friend of mine — a leader in her religious community and a radio personality to boot— told me once with a wry laugh, "I don't want your stinkin' pocketbook!" And it's actually safe for us to hear my friend's words in our heads most of the time when we are encountering folks who may look different from us.

So we can move from looking within to taking some action in the world around us. We can look perhaps to what is going on in our local communities, joining or starting a coalition like the Anti-Defamation League's "No Place for Hate" initiative, which works to combat bias and bullying in schools. I find myself wondering what behavior we are modeling for the next generation: wouldn't it be interesting for kids to grow up not knowing hatred first-hand? (Wouldn't that be ideal?!)
Wouldn't it be great for kids to know from the examples of the adults around that what one does in response to expressions of hatred is to gather together and find strength and solace in a community made up of lots of different kinds and colors of people?

We need to look around and see what opportunities there are for actions in our own communities —and in our lives. How many of us have friends or work colleagues of color or know people who come from very different religious backgrounds than ours? Have we invited some of these people into our homes for dinner? (Of course, we can't do that at the moment because of COVID — but zoom dinners are certainly possible in this era.)

How much do we know about what our neighbors think and feel? If something terrible were to happen in my community or in yours, how would people deal with it? Would a coalition be in place? Would the work to build bridges have been done already, or would there be a sense of folks being more disparate and not well organized? The time to take care of this, to prepare for challenges ahead, is now....

There is overwhelming evidence that hate can bloom most easily when people don't know each other personally. I am thinking of a film that

came out last year called “The Best of Enemies,” about the unlikely real-life friendship that bloomed in Durham NC in the 1970’s between an African-American civil rights activist, Ann Atwater, and CP Ellis, the head of the local Ku Klux Klan. When a situation threw the two together and had them learn about each others’ lives and families, they grew to care about each other personally and to see the world through each other’s eyes. Their inspiring story helps us understand the power of direct human connection. It’s much harder to consider people different and foreign, strange and suspect — it’s much harder to be suspicious of an entire group — when you know someone from that background on a personal level.

Another wonderful example of bridge building: the friendship between Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia, who could not have been further apart politically but who became best of friends. They shared a love of opera, and they not only worked together but socialized and traveled and laughed together as well. There are reports that Justice Scalia, in the middle of serious legal discussions, would whisper comments to Justice Ginsburg that would make her start to giggle. How amazing, in this highly-charged, politically divisive time that one Supreme Court Justice labeled a “rock-ribbed Conservative” could enjoy the company of another justice labeled an “unabashed liberal.” They were able to come together across — and in spite of — their differences. What a powerful example for us all!

Rabbi Hillel’s quote, “If I am not for myself, who am I, if I am *only* for myself, *what* am I?” has a third part: “*V’im lo achshav, aymatai*— if not now, when?”

There is truly no time like the present, no gift like now, to make the changes we want to see happen in our lives and in the world around us. What will you do to make our world a better place, a friendlier and less divisive place, in the coming year?

The power to make change is in our hands; may we use it wisely.

And let us say, Amen.