

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO LOYALTY?

As many of you know, Brian and I recently visited the new Yankee Stadium for a game against the Red Sox. Aside from losing the game, I didn't find it a pleasant experience. As we turned in our tickets at the gate we were greeted by a heckler who pointed at my Red Sox cap and called out to the crowd—"This is our house. B stands for Bronx. Right everybody? You better behave!" Though I'm sure he meant it in fun, I felt humiliated. Throughout the game I wondered whether our Boston fans would act the same way toward a Yankees fan at Fenway Park. I would hope not, but I'm sure some of you know the truth from your own experience. I have been asking myself ever since: What does this teach us about loyalty?

In Tracy Kidder's latest book, Strength in What Remains, a Journey of Remembrance and Forgiveness, the author tells the tale of an African man named Deo who escaped the genocide in his home country of Burundi while he was still a teenager. Deo, a Tutsi, is running from the Hutu tribes that are massacring his people. These are not tribes divided by religion or geography or even ethnicity. We could not tell them apart by looking at them, and often they can't either. But they are the children of different clans, which is enough to fan the flames of hatred and sufficient justification for genocide. As Deo is fleeing, he meets a woman who is a Hutu. As he stares at her in terror, she assures him, "I know what you are thinking. I am a Hutu. But first I am a woman and a mother. That is my ethnicity." When I heard this, I was moved at the generosity and compassion that enabled this woman to rise above her ethnic loyalties. I have been asking myself ever since: How do we define our own loyalty?

I am loyal to the Red Sox, but not fiercely. I am loyal to other women, but not chauvinistically. I am loyal to the Jewish people, but not exclusively. Like any other ideal, loyalty may have its extreme manifestations. But it is also a source of blessing. Unfortunately, I fear that modern, progressive Jews underestimate the value of loyalty to the Jewish people, to our community and to the synagogue.

Mordecai Kaplan felt compelled to demonstrate to American Jews that we are capable of living in two civilizations. In his day, Jews had to be convinced that they could participate in Jewish life and also take part in American civic life. They needed permission to be loyal Americans. In our generation, we need a rationale to be loyal Jews.

Although he believed in respecting other religious traditions, Kaplan would not endorse cutting our ties to Jewish life in the name of a higher universalism. Among his goals for Jewish education for our children, he emphasized both universalism and Jewish loyalty, as we read:

“To foster tolerance toward other groups, races, faiths; intellectual honesty, open-mindedness and responsibility; social and international-mindedness; loyalty to and participation in Jewish life in this and other countries.”

Judaism as a Civilization (from Dynamic Judaism, p.202)

I believe that a central question for us today is why we should remain loyal to our Jewish community when we have so many competing loyalties?

This is not only a Jewish issue. Loyalty as a value does not receive a lot of support in our culture. Just as baseball players change teams every few years, very few of us stay in one job for a lifetime the way our parents did. Loyalty in political circles is often derided for the possibilities of nepotism.

We don't join organizations the way our parents did, and if we do, we rarely see ourselves as "life members."

Columbia law professor George Fletcher writes, "Shifting loyalties is an increasingly common way of coping with a weak friendship, a shaky marriage, a religious community that takes the wrong stand on an important issue, or a nation that has come into the hands of the wrong political party."

But social science has demonstrated that loyalty is a source of social stability and of personal well-being. In the book, Why Good Things Happen to Good People, by Stephen Post and Jill Neimark, we learn just how important loyalty is. In this book loyalty is presented as one of ten ways of being good people that can lead to longer, healthier and happier lives.

What is loyalty anyway? **Loyalty is love across time.** We first experience loyal love in our families, as the authors describe it, "where we must stay committed to people long enough to discover their inevitable human imperfections—and then continue loving them anyway. This love is always tested and if we remain committed through the hard times, our loyalty and love will deepen and become more authentic." To be loyal is to continue our bonds despite lapses, disagreements, or even boredom.

In Jewish tradition, we call this "*brit*," covenant. We are bound by a covenant that has been maintained since Abraham first acknowledged the one true God in an age of worshipping the sun and the moon. Kinship may be our blood link to the past, but it is the faith and the deeds that our ancestors bequeathed to us that binds us to the covenant. To prove this point, Rambam defends the right of converts to Judaism to refer to "the God of my ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", knowing full well

they are spiritual, not biological ancestors. Jews by choice have the luxury of declaring their loyalty as a matter of volition. For Jews by birth our loyalty is born of history and memory. Therefore, we all invoke the brit in our daily prayers, linking our destiny to the deeds of those who came before us.

We first encounter the covenant at the birth and naming of a child. Brit milah or brit habat, naming ceremonies for boys and for girls, welcome our babies into the world and into the community of the entire Jewish people. When we induct our children into the covenant, we express our hope and commitment that they will continue to maintain it into the future.

But today, we are skeptical of loyalty. Before we make a commitment we demand meaning and fulfillment. This is why I'm happy to report that loyalty has been demonstrated through research studies to have psychic and physical benefits as well. Loyalty in marriage, friendship and community are all sources of health and well-being. For example, people who remain in healthy, happy and long-term marriages tend to be more loving and giving to others. Children of parents in low-conflict marriages (which is estimated to be the majority of marriages) are happier and more resilient than children whose parents do not stay together. Not all relationships are happy or healthy. For some, separation and divorce is the best solution.

Nevertheless, for those who can endure the highs and the lows that inevitably occur in all relationships, the value of remaining loyal and true to our spouses will continue to grow over time.

One stellar example of loyalty can be found when adult children care for aging and infirm parents. While we might think this is the exception, in fact, 70% of all in-home care for the elderly is done by family members. Time

after time, I have been moved by the self-sacrifice of daughters and sons who take a leave from their work, or bring their parents into their homes, or visit with an aging parent in a nursing home every single day, even if the parent is unresponsive. Such loyalty does not go unnoticed by the children of these dedicated caregivers. Often they grow up with the conviction to give their own parents the care they watched their parents give. Loyalty is best learned by experience.

However, not everyone has the capacity or the temperament to go to such lengths. And there are times when we might fear we are being disloyal because we simply can't do everything: take care of a disabled parent or child, take care of the rest of our families, and earn a living to support the household. Loyalty does not mean total self-sacrifice. We can show our love and devotion in many other ways too.

Loyal friendships are another source of life-long health. For example, according to research, among people over age 70 having a strong network of friends is more likely to help people live longer than having close family ties. It has been shown that having strong social networks reduces our risk of disease by lowering blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol. Our good friends help us endure the other losses in our lives, including the loss of a spouse through death or divorce.

Studies of women have shown that friendship is our best defense in times of stress. While men respond to stress with hormones that induce the fight-or-flight response, women also secrete large doses of oxytocin, a hormone that encourages bonding. Some posit that the reason women tend to

outlive men is because of women's ability to draw on friendship during hard times.

Like marriage, deep friendships preserve the lessons we have learned over time. Staying together teaches us life-lessons that cannot be gained through casual acquaintances. Beth Kephart writes in Into the Tangle of Friendship, "Even if someone's qualities begin to grate on you, if you have that long history, you're not going to give up easily. The thing that breaks a friendship is betrayal. And the thing that saves a friendship is forgiveness." Our friends can be mirrors, reflecting back who we have been and what we have become, thanks to the accrual of experiences over time.

Over time, loyal commitments weather the storms. Happiness can return after a dry spell and in fact, loyalty helps erode the harshness, just as water carves through hard rock.

A synagogue community that creates more opportunities for friendship and mutual support may be one of the greatest life-saving commitments you can make. Not only do we care for each other's physical needs, bringing meals and offering rides, but the close friendships that we form help us meet our biggest life challenges—sickness, financial stress, death of a loved one—and help us bear the burdens that come from loneliness and isolation. Though we may often joke about the Jewish tendency to kvetch and geshrei, to cry and complain, the benefits of our social networks far outweigh the stresses.

Loyalty does not mean that we always get along. Sometimes protest is itself a form of loyalty. Our loyalties must be refined with wisdom and reflection. When Abraham learned that God intended to destroy the cities of

Sodom and Gomorrah, he railed against God's injustice. Did God abandon Abraham for disagreeing? No. Our tradition honors Abraham for standing up to God. True loyalty is strengthened by the tests and hard times.

Loyalty need not be blind or deaf. It just needs to be enduring. As the Jewish people has endured, as we have been faithful to one another despite the destruction of two Holy Temples, despite expulsion from our land and exile to every corner of the globe. As the Talmud teaches,

לכ לארשי מיברע הז הזב

All Israel is responsible for one another (Shavuot 39a). We must hear the voice of love call to us on behalf of every Jew. This includes loyalty to our homeland in the State of Israel, which we can love despite our disagreements or criticisms.

Ted Kennedy was a shining example of tempering loyalty with loving critique. Governor Deval Patrick paid tribute to Senator Ted Kennedy at the memorial service saying, "He loved the Commonwealth and this country. He loved the American people. But he also believed that we could be better..." It is imperative that we love the Jewish people and the Jewish state, even when we believe we can be better.

Finally, loyalty is not a closed circle. I can be loyal to my husband, loyal to my work, loyal to my friends and loyal to my people, and still have more room to love others. As Psychologist Arthur Aron has said, "Positive feelings toward other groups does not need to diminish loyalty for one's own. In fact, sometimes working together with one's own group to help another group increases both in-group and out-group loyalty." Many of us have learned this lesson through our involvement in Jewish-Christian and

Jewish-Muslim dialogue and our trips to New Orleans and Limestone, Maine. In the process of meeting people from another religious or cultural community, we learn what we have in common. We may also be surprised to find that the deeper we enter into dialogue, the more love we have for what is ours. Likewise, the pride that I demonstrate in my tradition engenders even more respect from others.

As Jonathan Sachs, chief rabbi of Great Britain has taught, Judaism is unlike most of western culture, in that it moves from the universal toward the particular. We begin our service, we begin the Torah, we begin our theology with an understanding that all Creation is equal. All humans are made in the image of God. From there, we focus on the history of our people and our unique covenant with what is holy. That is the human condition, as Rabbi Sachs says, “We are particular and universal, the same and different, human beings as such, but also members of this family, that community, this history, that heritage.” (The Dignity of Difference)

When God called Abraham to leave his land and to be the father of a new nation, one of the promises to our people was to be a blessing to all of humanity. Not to be a nation in isolation, nor to raise ourselves above humanity, but to embrace other human beings with blessings. With love.

Can we be loyal to the Jewish people and love humanity as well? I read Jewish tradition responding with a resounding yes. It is out of our experience of loving and remaining loyal to one another that we serve humanity best.

What does it mean to be loyal to the Jewish people?

We help our fellow Jews when they are in trouble. We share our joys and comfort in times of sorrow.

We remain in conversation with other Jews even when we disagree.

We offer loving critiques of our people when they behave immorally.

Most important, we do not walk away. For our own best interests, for our own growth and well-being, for the sake of our parents and the good of our children.

May we use this holy day to renew our loyalties. May we find the strength to forgive those who have betrayed us. May we find the courage to reach out and ask forgiveness of those we have hurt. May we find the love to rededicate ourselves to our community and to the Jewish people everywhere. And like Abraham, may we be worthy of being a blessing. *Ken yehi ratzon.*

*Rabbi Barbara Penzner
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