

Love and (Non)Judgment

Paula Brody

Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year, the practical ethics column will focus on personal and social ethics. Each month a guest columnist wrestles on paper with situations where ethical considerations tug on the heart and demand deeply thoughtful consideration. The column is co-sponsored by Shelley and Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. The series of columns, with responses, is available on www.shma.com.

Dr. Paula Brody serves on the Outreach staff of the Union for Reform Judaism, working with interfaith families and individuals exploring conversion.

WHAT DOES TORAH teach us about the ethics of relating to in-laws and others in our family, and our friends and colleagues, who are of other faith traditions? Perhaps the most relevant texts are in Exodus, enabling us to study the relationship between Moses and his father-in-law, Yitro (commonly translated as Jethro), who is a priest of Midian. Immediately after the Exodus from Egypt, Moses has a wilderness reunion with his wife Zipporah, his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, and his father-in-law, Yitro. The weekly Torah portion carrying Jethro's name (Exodus 18:1-20:23), which contains the Ten Commandments, demonstrates the profound mutual love between Moses and Yitro. Both men deeply respect each other's different religious beliefs. When Moses talks to Yitro about his experience of God's revelation, Yitro listens carefully, showing respect for his son-in-law's beliefs. And Yitro rejoices with his son-in-law, even joining Moses in a ritual offering.

Yitro, who is experienced in leading the Midianites, offers Moses valuable leadership training, especially in the delegation of authority and stress management. Moses listens to Yitro's wise counsel; he "heeded his father-in-law and did just as he said."

This text provides an ethical basis for respecting another person's cultural and religious faith without diminishing our own faith. Yitro models nonjudgmental, caring, and supportive listening, encouraging us to ask questions about faith differences and to listen to responses, without judgment. Like Yitro, we can acknowledge, even participate in rituals different from our own, while holding tight to our individual religious beliefs. We also learn that good communication is central to good relationships. But the most important lesson is that love creates the strongest

connection between people — that love can overcome differences in background, religion, and experience.

As parents, how do we draw on our ethical heritage to open our hearts to loving relationships with our adult children's choice of life partner? And how do we foster relationships with our in-laws, from other faith backgrounds, that will nurture the whole family? In interfaith families, where such openness abounds, religion — rather than being a taboo topic — becomes a subject for shared learning, even shared joy, through participation around a holiday table or at a lifecycle event. In fact, close relationships with people of different faith backgrounds may strengthen one's own faith connection.

In Exodus we learn more about the relationship between Moses and his father-in-law than we learn about the relationship between Moses and his wife, Zipporah. In the mysterious verses Exodus 4:24-26, Zipporah does take a leading role in the circumcision of their sons, assuring their Jewish identity. And she thus serves as a role model for the many non-Jewish partners in interfaith relationships, reinforcing the Jewish identity of their children. Regretfully, the biblical text is particularly silent when it comes to Moses's interaction with his sons Gershom and Eliezer. Although the text presents Moses as an exemplary "son" to his father-in-law, we never learn if Moses is a model father to his sons.

Moses is the stranger in Midian, embraced by Yitro and his family. Zipporah, Yitro's daughter, becomes the stranger, when she links her destiny to Moses and the Israelite people. As Jews, we are commanded throughout the Torah to open our hearts to the stranger, to remember our own experience as

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God's Majesty and Our Human Dignity

Sara Paasche-Orlow

MOST AMERICAN JEWS lack a coherent theological system. What is God? What does God have to do with us? And how does our view of God influence our behavior? It is much easier to identify theological concepts that have been abandoned than to elaborate the new language and metaphors that will help define a modern Jewish theology. One of the most common traditional metaphors for God that has fallen out of favor is God as King. The image of God as King, seated on a high and lofty throne (*haMelekh yoshev al kiseh ram v'nisah*), no longer has salience and comes to mind mostly as an idea that is broadly rejected and lampooned.

Today, the most prevalent contemporary framework for conceptualizing Jewish theology is to see the godliness of human beings. God is the movement for good in history, and glimpses of this good can be seen by the good acts people do that reflect the divine spark within each person. This is an amalgam of: Martin Buber's view of *imatatio Dei*, the notion of being made in God's image to act in God's ways; Mordechai Kaplan's notion of God elaborated through human action; and the neo-kabbalistic idea that each person contains a mote of the original light of creation. In different ways, these three schemas place human beings into the center of the conversation about the essence of God, which appears to be quite distinct from the distant God as *melekh*, king on high.

I serve as the rabbi at Hebrew SeniorLife, an organization that serves the elderly of Boston in diverse ways: community-based housing, long- and short-term care, community-based services, assisted living, adult day health, and a continuing care retirement community. I work with the elderly and infirm, people in their nineties, some whose minds are hidden in an ailing vessel and others whose minds are failing or have failed them long ago. Often I am with people whose minds and bodies are betraying them, and they understand that they have a progressive condition.

We frequently talk about God and they ask me: where is God? They want to know if I believe a loving God would have created such a slow endurance-at-the-end existence of suffering. Our conversations return again and again to the issue of accepting the human

condition and trying to find strength and comfort in the face of adversity. And we return to these very simple answers: somehow, in the face of suffering and loss, we are called upon in even the smallest of ways to be caring, to understand the situation of the other, and to do whatever is within our power to ennoble ourselves and the people around us.

Through being able to understand the needs and feelings of the other, we create connection and provide each other with an emergent form of interpersonal revelation. We rescue each other from aloneness and allow ourselves to encounter the God inherent in the Other. God happens when we reach out to care beyond ourselves.

At Hebrew SeniorLife there are more than 400 people at the High Holiday services; approximately 150 people come in wheelchairs, helped by volunteers and aids. The High Holiday *nusakh* begins with the old fashioned, theologically out-of-date, image of God as King seated on a high and lofty throne. Suddenly, I am transfixed. Here, in front of me, are the thrones of our godliness! The throne is not off floating in the heavens, but here in our midst, found in our every effort to create moments of dignity for the most vulnerable in society. This is a sea of wheelchairs full of God's majesty and splendor — a vivid scene of dignity radiating from each person. When human dignity is degraded anywhere, each of our godliness is diminished. Such is the dignity that emerges from God's majesty, *malkhut*; it serves to increase the dignity of all who dare to behold it.

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strangers. When we open our hearts to those who link their lives to Judaism through our families, we may open the possibilities for greater personal fulfillment in our lives and in the lives of those we love. If we can express our appreciation to our adult children's life partners, thanking them for sustaining not only our sons and daughters, but also our grandchildren, through their love, we will fulfill the ethical commandment to love the stranger. Our love and nurturing may make all things possible.

Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow, a Wexner Graduate Fellow, was a CLAL Fellow and a program officer at the Jewish Life Network. She helped found *spark: Partnership for Service and* currently serves as Director of Religious Services at Hebrew SeniorLife in Boston.