



Parshat Mishpatim
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Shabbat Shekalim: You Matter to Me
by Rabbinic Intern Aliza Berger
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

Something wild has been happening over the past couple of weeks. It started with a minor discovery. My focus here at Temple Emanuel is on teen and young professional engagement; and, in preparation for an upcoming young professionals' event, I discovered that we did not have contact information for many of the young professionals who grew up in this community.

So, with the help of Sarah Jallow in the office, I sent a message to Temple Emanuel parents of young professionals, asking them if they would be willing to share their children's contact information so that I could reach out. At the same time, I sent a personal note to every young professional for whom we have contact information, and asked if they would be willing to meet for coffee and to talk. I figured there might be 20 or 30 people who would respond to my message and who might be willing and interested to continue the conversation in person.

Was I in for a surprise! We sent the email last Wednesday. Within the first couple of hours, my inbox was flooded. By the time Shabbos rolled in last week, I had received nearly 500 messages—a number which has continued to grow. That was in addition to the phone calls and individuals who stopped by my office to chat. I was blown away by offers of helpful support and thoughtful analysis of the challenges we face in engaging millennials. Parents didn't just share their children's contact information, they wrote to me about their family histories, their children's successes and struggles in the world, their dreams, and about their own experiences

here at Temple Emanuel. I never expected a contact request to generate so many beautiful connections!

And those beautiful connections are going to continue to grow! Starting on March 24th, we are partnering with the Brookline Moishe House, a local young professional community, to host a Shabbat dinner for young adults after Shabbat Alive. We are meeting—I am in the process of meeting with every young professional in our community who is interested and we are going to work together to create engaging and accessible programming here for young professionals. This is just the beginning.

But today, I want to talk with you about a response to my message which caught me by surprise. Some parents were put off by my email message. They felt that my use of “they” and “them” instead of “he” and “she” was a grammatical mistake, or worse, a slight. They were upset that I didn’t write an email which reflected their child’s preferred gender pronoun.

I want to apologize if I offended you in any way by my use of third person, gender-neutral pronouns in my email message. That was certainly not my intention.

The language that I used in my email was inspired by a blog post I read while I was living in Jerusalem and studying at Machon Pardes. It was written by my now friend, Rabbi Becky Silverstein. At that point, Becky identified as a gender-queer rabbinical student; now he is serving as the first openly Trans Conservative rabbi in the United States.

Becky wrote about what it was like for him to visit the Western Wall. That was when they were first starting to do ID and passport checks to make sure that people approaching the wall were doing so according to the sex they were assigned at birth. As a gender-queer rabbinical student, Becky was afraid to approach the wall on the men’s side, afraid that someone might demand to see his passport, or worse; and, wearing cargo shorts and a button down shirt,

Becky was also afraid of approaching on the women's side, lest he be perceived as a man crossing the boundary. In the blog, Becky wrote about what it was like for him to stand in the courtyard, holding the prayer he wanted to place in the wall, the prayer asking God for the strength to create space for himself and other gender queer individuals in Jewish communities and at the Wall. Becky wrote about what it was like to hold that prayer and watch it fall to the ground.

That was the first time I had ever considered what it might feel like to be gender queer living in a largely binary world. I never thought about what it would feel like to be asked to choose between "he" and "she," when neither felt like an appropriate label. It never occurred to me that there are people in our communities who are excluded from the conversation, either by gender barriers at a wall or by gendered pronouns in conversation. I decided in that moment, that whenever possible, I would start using gender neutral pronouns in conversations when I didn't know people's preferred gender pronoun, and as a way of normalizing that convention and making space for every individual no matter their gender presentation or experience.

It never occurred to me, that using gender neutral pronouns would make people feel excluded or "othered." Here I was, trying my best to be as inclusive as possible and I managed to write a message which made some people feel as if they were left outside the tent.

So what gives? What's the lesson in all of this? Where is the Torah?

You could say the lesson is the message we hear in the media all the time—there is no way to be politically correct. You will offend people no matter what you say or do. It's not a question of if, but when. The best we can hope for is to speak honestly and try to work through conflicts as they arise.

And while on some level this feels true, it also feels deeply dissatisfying. I want to live in a world where I can shape my words to heal and not to harm. I want to live in a world where I can regard everyone I come across with my language and with my actions, and where I can do better rather than resigning myself to inevitable failure. I want to live in a world where I am seen as someone who cares.

Maybe the lesson in all of this is not that it's impossible to be politically correct, but that in a world where we sometimes feel that we are invisible, or that we are just one of many, we are all hungry to be seen. Each of us yearns to be appreciated for the gifts we bring to the planet and for the ways we go out of our way to help others. Each of us longs to be witnessed in community, and to participate in a community where we are inspired by what we see.

Today is Shabbat Shekalim, the first of the four special shabbatot which lead up to Pesach. In today's extra reading, we heard about the census, the way our ancestors were counted in the desert. Each individual was instructed to bring a half shekel. The half shekel was counted, and then used as an offering of atonement and a donation for the construction of the Mishkan.

When our ancestors were invited to bring the same contribution in order to be counted, when each ancestor was seen through the lens of the same half shekel, the community collected a certain finite amount for the construction of the Mishkan. Though it was a start, those half shekels weren't enough to build a holy sanctuary in the desert. They needed more.

So our ancestors asked for everyone to bring gifts from the heart, *nediv lev*, to contribute towards the Mishkan. People brought jewelry and fabrics, arts and metals. They brought so much that our ancestors had to ask people to stop—they were overwhelmed with gifts.

Our Torah teaches us that when we see everyone in the same way, with the same gifts to contribute and limited to the same form, we cannot gather enough energy to build a holy sanctuary. But, when we invite each person to come as they are; when we are willing to recognize the unique gifts of every person, we have more than enough to do our holy work in the world. Not only that, but when everyone is invited to bring all of their gifts to the table, then we can too—and it is in that moment that we can truly be seen.

The truth is we are all hungry to be seen.

Will we see?

We are all hungry to be loved.

Will we love?

We are all hungry to know—we all *need* to know—that we matter.

Will we look each other in the eyes and say: “you matter to me” ?