

A Radical Idea

This morning I want to propose something extraordinary, something you likely haven't considered before and something that may not seem in keeping with Rosh Hashanah. I want to propose that everyone here become radicals. Now I recognize the danger of being misconstrued and preaching the radicalization of an entire congregation. This is most definitely not a call to arms or to the advancement of diabolical purposes. The word radical itself is neutral, it is neither good nor bad. It comes from the Latin *radix* meaning root; in that sense it is being rooted in our beliefs so that they find expression everyday. Being radicalized is better known for its negative connotations and implementation. But what if we approach it from the opposite side; what if, as a noun, we all agreed to be radicals, and as an adjective, we practiced radical love, radical inclusion, and radical empathy; and in our everyday lives, we experienced radical amazement. Not just one day a year, not even for a few days a month, but each and every day. We are the purveyors of positive beliefs, practicing positive humanism and animating a very positive form of Judaism. This then is a call to action. Let's examine how at Rosh Hashanah we can pledge to change our behavior to mirror the meaning of the day: a new start to our year with an introspective reflection of what we believe and a sincere determination of how we can actualize those beliefs. When our beliefs are positive, our roles as radicals necessarily mean they too are positive.

At almost the midpoint of the Torah is the portion read this morning, Leviticus 19 with its key verse 18: v'ahavtah la'raicha, c'mocha; love your neighbor as yourself. Everything that comes before and everything that comes after can be seen as part of a text for which this verse is the fulcrum. Leviticus 19 is part of the so-called holiness code because the biblical author wanted their human readers to emulate and integrate the biblical god of their creation. But it might as easily be termed the ethical code for its often beautiful exposition of ethics. Apart from verses that are time-bound to when they were written dealing with often uncomfortable subjects such as sacrifices, slavery, and other rituals, the central verses of the centered text set forth the behavioral actions necessary to achieve a social compact and live in a community. V'ahavtah la'raicha, c'mocha; love your neighbor as yourself. In total there are 613 commandments in the Torah, some prescriptive, some proscriptive. The rationale for their undertaking is distinctly two-fold, and is roughly divided in half between those with a theological reason, and those with a compassion reason. For the former, the reason to behave a certain way is stated as "because I am the Lord your God," often paired with the reminder of redemption, "who took you out of the land of Egypt." It is a decidedly theological statement about the biblical god and his interventionist function on behalf of the Israelite people. But significantly the compassion verses have as their underpinning "because you were once strangers in a strange land," namely Egypt,

without any mention of the biblical god, but with the implication that knowing the experience of suffering and hardship increases one's sensitivity to others going through similar suffering. That notion could easily be called radical empathy; it is an empathy so deeply and virtually embedded in our collective historical DNA that it can at times seem irretrievable. Yet we need only look at the significant role it played in our very recent memory, driving scores of Jews in particular to protest unjust laws against immigrants and refugees, and to welcome them instead. Leviticus 19 reminds us that indeed two things can be true at the same time: we are inheritors of a text that has grossly difficult passages but also has points of wisdom and ethics.

The so-called Holiness Code opens with the words "You shall be holy for I your God am holy" and intersperses references to the biblical god in some, though not all, of the verses. Nonetheless, the injunctions found in this code are examples of radical empathy, radical love and radical inclusion. Compassion truly requires all three. The people are given particular instructions in verses 10 - 15 that evoke the compassion rationale for the biblical commandments even when it is not expressly stated.

Verse 10 states, "You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger." In biblical terms, the poor and the stranger, often coupled with the widow, are seen as

a category in need of a social net. Without it, they are deemed to be at great risk. From this we learn that not everything belongs to you but you are to consider the needs of those less fortunate; a vivid example of radical empathy.

In verse 11, honesty is recognized as the key to any functioning society as it directs “You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another.” This ancient message resonates millenia later and needs to be heeded in our own world where lies are perpetuated masquerading as truth.

Verse 13 instructs, “You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning.” Even at this early stage of our tradition, the rights of laborers were taken into account - a day’s work for a day’s pay, payable on that day. Workers are not people to be exploited but instead their very humanity is to be reckoned with. This can be taken as an example of radical inclusion.

Verse 14 is such a curious verse stating, “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.” But the deaf will never hear the insult, and the blind will never see who placed a stumbling block before them. So for whose benefit is this instruction? It is for us because *we* will know what we have done and we will be lessened for doing it. It demonstrates radical love for the deaf and the blind, and the benefit we each get from radical inclusion of all people.

Verse 15 likewise shows us radical inclusion as we find the original idea that there is one law for everyone regardless of your station in life. “You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kin fairly.”

Although there has been an argument in our tradition that by fellow and neighbor, the biblical author meant only other Israelites, not others in general, it is a fair reading and certainly a meaningful interpretation to read neighbor as any person of any persuasion; as Humanistic Jews, we do not limit our kindness, our efforts at repairing the world, only to other Jews. Such a narrow interpretation neglects our very human need for connection and compassion. The world is not made better with such short-sightedness.

Imagine for just one moment if all these ancient standards were not merely aspirational but were put into effect every day. The world would be radically different. We would fully and finally actualize the injunction to love our neighbor as ourselves. The words of journalist and a Reform Jew himself, Walter Lippman are particularly apt: “Our conscience is not the vessel of eternal verities. It grows with our social life, and a new social condition means a radical change in conscience.” Were it not this way, we would stagnate and fail to learn the lessons of history; social norms and mores would be mired in the past. The Torah itself would be a mere curiosity from which we could draw no wisdom or understanding,

no application to our own world. Instead we draw on eternal verities, too often honored in their breach, to develop our own on-going and ever-growing sense of self and community.

The idea of loving one's neighbor as oneself is so central to Judaism's core ethical beliefs that there is a story about the first century CE Rabbi Hillel. He was approached by a man who asked him to explain Judaism while standing on one foot. The man was thought to be a Stoic for whom brevity was a key value. Hillel responded, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to another; that is the entire Torah." If you are not convinced by ancient texts, the eternal verities to which Lippman refers, to be radicalized for good, let's try to understand what it would be like in our world, in our times, if we were. What might happen if there were, as he put it, a radical change in our conscience.

Let's consider radical love. The website betterhelp.com can assist us to understand both radical and love. It notes "[t]he term 'radical' can be used to describe something that is whole, complete, and thorough. A radical change, for instance, is one that completely overhauls existing standards. Radical love, then, is love that's full, all-encompassing, and given without criteria or strings attached." Imagine love without conditions, love simply for its own sake; love that is a commodity that is never exhausted and only increases; love that is radical in its implementation and impact.

Radical empathy is expounded on another website, happiness.com. There it notes, “‘Radical empathy is a concept that . . . encourages people to actively consider another person’s point of view in order to connect more deeply with them.’ Today, this trait enables us to see and understand another person’s point of view. It promotes tolerance, thoughtfulness and kindness – all essential traits for a peaceful, harmonious community.” Now to some the word radical may seem superfluous but it actually means to bring the idea to full consciousness, to make it an active part of our existence. Human beings are now thought to have an empathy gene that allows an effective social contract and meaningful social interactions. Kindness, generosity and graciousness are all a part; children naturally exhibit this. Yet somehow as adults we relegate our empathy to the background instead of keeping it in the foreground. As radicals, we must rearrange our foreground putting love and empathy, key elements of our beliefs, at the front.

Being a radical also means practicing radical inclusion. Our national organization the Society for Humanistic Judaism includes a statement on its website titled just that. It says, in part, “We believe that diversity is a positive value and a strength, whether racial, gender, financial, or neurodiversity. . . .Our inclusivity does not emerge from a need to make accommodation to demographic trends, it stems from our strongly-held convictions about full equality and the dignity of all people.” Radical inclusion then means the unconditional welcoming

of all people, the unconditional involvement of all families however they are defined; and the unconditional love for all people however they define themselves. It is not and cannot be mere acceptance or tolerance because those things imply a judgment, at times begrudging. Radical inclusion recognizes the strength inherent in diversity.

Practicing radical love, or radical empathy, or radical inclusion expands our sense of connectedness. We are never lost in them, giving up ourselves or failing to set appropriate boundaries. Instead, none of them cannot exist without loving our neighbors as ourselves. Each marks us as a radical.

When we describe ourselves as radicals, and use the word as an adjective for each of the positive components, it inevitably leads us to live our lives in radical amazement. These are the words of Rabbi and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel who was a Conservative rabbi and influential thinker in the 1950's and 60's, and who lost his family in the Holocaust: "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." As a Conservative Jew, he followed the demands of halachah or Jewish law, living his Jewish life quite differently than we choose to do. Yet he ascribed reasons for ritual that went beyond the traditional, and can resonate with us as Humanistic Jews. He noted that

when making a blessing over food for example, it was not just an expression of gratitude to the divine for the food as it was for him, but even for him, and especially then for us, we are expressing wonder and radical amazement at very existence of all the varied and wonderful food there is. Radical amazement demands that real attention be paid; nothing should be taken for granted. We should never be too busy or too preoccupied to really see, to really listen, and to really hear. We would miss too much and never experience radical amazement. Without radical amazement we risk being incapable of radical love, radical empathy and radical inclusion because we would be existing superficially. Deep appreciation of our lives, and deep articulation of our beliefs are the very things that can radicalize us. They allow us to love our neighbors as ourselves. There is no better way to bring in our new year. V'ahavtah la'raicha c'mocha. Let that be our radical mantra.