

Thriving on Our Raft, Together

Rosh Hashanah Eve 5779

Rabbi Barry H. Block

I received my rabbinic training in an era of strict standards. Newly-minted Reform rabbis were discouraged from officiating at weddings unless both partners were Jewish. Only members were permitted to register their children in religious schools. Even High Holy Day admission was often an exclusive privilege of synagogue membership. Although I eagerly accepted my first invitation to officiate at a same-sex wedding in 1995, many Reform leaders then were still refusing, claiming opposite-sex marriage to be the Jewish ideal. When asked for exceptions to practice and policy, we were reluctant at best.

In those days, we imagined that we were defending Judaism from threats of dissolution. We didn't know to celebrate non-Jewish parents raising Jewish children. We didn't understand that people might need to be welcomed and engaged before they could be expected to make a full commitment.

Fast-forward to 5779, the fall of 2018. The vast majority of U.S. Reform rabbis joyfully officiate any wedding that we perceive to be establishing a Jewish marriage, whatever the religious identities of the couple. We welcome young people to our religious schools and camps, whenever the intention is to raise them as Jews, whether their parents are members or not. I do not know a Reform rabbi who declines to officiate at same-sex weddings.

This summer, in Jerusalem, I was privileged to hear a talk by Professor Michael Marmor at Hebrew Union College.ⁱ Rabbi Marmor compared the infrastructure of our Jewish life to a raft, which must be light enough to float while also bound together strongly enough that it does not fall apart when cargo is placed upon it. If our Jewish standards are too heavy, our raft will sink. If we do not maintain appropriate structure, our people will dissolve.

The issue is hotly contested in Israel and the Jewish world in 2018 – and relevant to American life, too. If we do not maintain a light, flexible definition about who constitutes “us” – who is a member of the Jewish community, who is a real Israeli, a true American – we will sink, all of us, together. If we do not retain appropriate structure, our people, our Jewish homeland, and our beloved America will cease to perpetuate the values that have given meaning to each since its beginning.

For Judaism, the issue isn't new. In 1922, Zionist pioneer Haim Nachman Bialik wrote, "Already from its earliest days this nation saw itself as a body comprising two 'ingredients:' shepherds and workers of the land."ⁱⁱ Bialik was not highlighting a small detail. In the ancient world, societies were either agricultural and settled or pastoral and nomadic. Farmers worshiped gods with a physical home, a Temple in a particular place, where the faithful would bring grain offerings to celebrate annual agricultural festivals. Nomadic peoples served gods identified with their ancestors, built altars wherever they were, and offered animals sacrifices on occasions designated by the phases of the moon. Israel, breaking with the norm, sought to knit the two together. The calendar would be both solar and lunar. Animals and grains were offered. The one, universal God was understood to be connected with a particular place, the Jerusalem Temple, and also with the ancestors they all claimed, beginning with Abraham and Sarah.

That raft was fragile. When it got too heavy – when the priests insisted that sacrifices be brought to only one Temple, for example – the kingdom split in two, with the northern one ultimately facing annihilation. When the ropes tying the raft together became too loose – when the leaders debated proper worship so harshly that they descended into hatred and divisiveness, the Romans seized on that weakness and destroyed the Temple for good.

At Congregation B'nai Israel, we tend our raft diligently. We seek to practice Judaism with both authenticity and creativity, assuring that the raft is strong enough to hold. To give an example that most take for granted, we hold services on every Shabbat and Holy Day, evening and morning, and adhere to the basic framework of traditional Jewish worship. At the same time, we strive to identify and meet the needs of each individual and family and to say "yes" to new requests whenever we possibly can, assuring that the raft is light enough to float. A recent example was Carmen Arick's suggestion, endorsed by our Board, that we open Religious School to any child seeking to be raised Jewish, whether parents are members or not.

We may feel good about the sea-worthiness of our Reform Jewish raft, specifically but not only at our own congregation. At the same time, though, the two lands we love most, America and Israel, are engaged in epic struggles that threaten to sink those sacred nations.

This summer, the Israeli Knesset adopted a "Nation-State Law," a blunt instrument with constitutional weight and "a solution in search of a problem." Israel has been the nation-state of the Jewish people since its Declaration of

Independence. The law enshrines the flag that has flown since 1948. Other aspects of the legislation are more troubling. Arabic, previously an official language of Israel, is now relegated to a language with “special status,”ⁱⁱⁱ a slap in the face of the 20% of Israelis whose first language is Arabic. Druze have taken particular offense, being loyal citizens whose men serve in the Israel Defense Forces with the same military obligation as Jews. The law also slights Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel, a concession by the government to the demands of the ultra-Orthodox. If that weren’t bad enough, in a cynical bid to assure ultra-Orthodox votes for the Nation-State Law, Prime Minister Netanyahu and his coalition adopted a law which “expands eligibility for state-supported surrogacy to include single women but excludes single men and gay couples,” whose equality the Prime Minister had promised to ensure.^{iv}

Hebrew Union College professor Dahlia Marx has written, “In the Jewish state, ... where Jews are no longer a minority, Jewish definitions can be proactive – allowing for concern about others without negating manifestations of Jewish nationality, religion, and peoplehood.”^v Dr. Marx seems to have been proven wrong, when the Knesset ignored the well-being of every non-Jewish citizen of Israel and plenty of Jews, too.

The Nation-State Law endangers Israel’s future. Narrowly defining “who is an Israeli,” discriminating against expressions of Judaism embraced by most of world Jewry, and conferring secondary status on gay Israelis, the Jewish State builds its raft with planks so heavy that it may not float. At the same time, by writing off so many Israelis, and so many Jews worldwide, the government threatens the ties that bind the raft together, risking dissolution.

Our beloved America is similarly vulnerable.

American reality is changing. “Demographic projections suggest that whites will become the numerical minority in 2044, when the nation will become a majority-minority country.”^{vi} Assumptions about people’s gender may no longer be accurate. “Marriage” has expanded to include couples who could not traditionally form legal unions. Employment that has fed families for generations, in the coal mines and in the factories, is endangered by automation and threats to the environment. Millions of Americans are dizzied by these changes. They fear for the ties that have bound America together. If the bonds break, the raft that has carried America across nearly two and a half centuries will shatter into fragments, drowning our nation.

In reaction, white supremacy finds sympathy in the White House. Parents were cruelly separated from their children at our southern border in an attempt to deter refugees from seeking asylum here. That harsh practice has been abandoned, but not the plan to build a wall like China's along our southern border. The Attorney General is perverting American religious liberty to justify discrimination against LGBTQ Americans and to permit private entities to withhold reproductive freedom from employees and students who need it. "American" has been defined so narrowly that it includes only those whose families would've appeared mainstream on network television in the 1950s. That insistence that Americans look the same and are the same was so heavy that it threatened to sink this country in the 1960s and 1970s. We must not permit that to happen again.

If we are to survive this difficult moment in history – all of us, together, on this fragile raft – we would do well to remember the foundations of ancient Israel. Flexible enough to accommodate those who marked time by the moon and others whose calendars followed the cycle of seasons. Strong enough that one God was understood to be simultaneously universal and connected to a particular land and people.

Let Israel be sufficiently strong that its distinctiveness as a Jewish State enables it to be flexible, embracing Arab and Druze citizens, as well as Jews, of every religious expression and personal identity.

Let America be sufficiently light on its feet to adapt to changing realities, taking into account the very different but equally real and legitimate needs of the immigrant and the native born; the farmer, the coal miner, and the city-dweller; Americans of every religion, with every skin pigment God created, of any sexual orientation or gender identity. America's greatness is in its strength to withstand the winds of change.

Talmud teaches that mustard farmers and bee keepers were required to keep their distance from one another.^{vii} This June, Elli Fischer explained: "Honey mustard is a great flavor, but if you turn the bees loose on the mustard plant, you ruin both, because they have to develop independently with their own integrity."^{viii} Here in America, we would do well to celebrate our diversity. We should celebrate the honey and the mustard, if you will, separately, and also enjoy them together. That kind of happy coexistence has become difficult. Some are comfortable only around other Americans who share their ethnicity and religion. Still more fear their neighbors whose sexual orientation or gender

identity they simply do not understand. And too many of us are intolerant of others whose politics we find repugnant.

But we are all on the same raft called America. We will float into the future, or we will sink, all of us. Whatever our differences, let us all find ways to row in rhythm, moving our nation and our people forward, safely over calm seas and rough surf, thriving, all on our raft, together.

Amen.

ⁱ Lecture by Rabbi Michael Marmor, Ph.D., at Alumi Day, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Jerusalem, July 7, 2018.

ⁱⁱ H.N. Bialik, "On the Duality in Israel," 1922, provided in Hebrew with translation by Rabbi Michael Marmor, Ph.D.

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Casey and Oren Liebermann, "Israel passes controversial 'nation-state' bill with no mention of equality or minority rights," *CNN.com*, updated 7:36 AM ET, July 19, 2018.

^{iv} Jeremy Sharon and Jonathan Weber Rosen, "Gay Couples Denied Right to Surrogacy in New Law," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 18, 2018.

^v Dalia Marx, Ph.D., "The Prayer for the State of Israel: Universalism and Particularism," 2014, excerpt provided by Rabbi Michael Marmor, Ph.D.

^{vi} Dudley L. Poston, Jr., Rogelio Saenz, "U.S. whites will soon be the minority in number, but not in power," *The Baltimore Sun*, August 8, 2017, 10:30 AM.

^{vii} Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 25a.

^{viii} Elli Fischer, "Michael Chabon's Sacred and Profane Cliché Machine," *Jewish Review of Books*, June 13, 2018, accessed on August 5, 2018 at <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articlees/3239/michael-chabons-sacred-and-profane-cliche-machine/>. I was introduced to this text by Rabbi Michael Marmor, Ph.D.