

Identity: Whole and Holy

Rabbi Maralee Gordon

We've seen so much identity politics since the beginning of the presidential election process, which has not abated since November 8 one iota. Identity politics places an identity value on people based on their ethnicity, color, gender declaration, sexual preference, citizenship status, and/or religion. It says, "I know who you are" based on one or more aspects of a person's existence that the identifier does not share!

Now it's pathetic enough if I say, I know you because I'm a knitter and I see that you knit too, I compost my kitchen waste and you do too. Really?! I can claim to know who you are because we share this behavior in common. Or, you have blue eyes and so do I. You're left-handed and so am I. That's enough to say I know you and trust you? Really?!

I mentioned that's pathetic enough, but perhaps it gives us entree to get to know each other better, to let down our guard, to reduce that fear factor a little bit. But pathetic is to claim that I know you because you are a different color and therefore strange and lesser than I and dangerous? Fill in the blank: have a different sexual preference, strange and lesser than I and dangerous; have a different religious practice, strange and lesser than I and dangerous?

What is identity that we can make these value judgments? Sure, many of us have a tendency to fear what is different about another. But we have a fundamental biblical principle to help us get over that. I'm using fundamental on purpose!! Look, Leviticus 19 tells us to love our neighbor as ourself—someone who is like us, part of our societal fabric. And we tend to ignore that later in the same chapter it tells us to love the stranger as ourself—and look out for them, because the fact

that they are a stranger in the community means they have less opportunities than we have.

The fundamental biblical principle to help us get over our fear of what is different about another person is at the beginning of the Bible. Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created human beings, male and female, in God's image. Not a specific tribe, human beings.

It is clear to me that the image of God in which we are created is not our outward, physical appearance or abilities. Nor is it our personality that we're born with, nor our intellectual capacity. Nor is it our artistic gifts, our sexual preferences, or the way in which we worship God.

Being created in the image of God – hold that inside you and realize that you in your entirety—things you're good at, ways in which you feel weak or deficient, you are created in the image of God. You have that spark of divinity within you-- maybe that's what we mean when we refer to the soul.

Each of us is created in God's image, which means that when we interact with another human being, we could take a deep breath that includes the internal message "I'm created in God's image so I will not be afraid that I'll be judged; this person is created in God's image, do not be afraid of them, do not judge them, do not turn away". And just imagine how that could transform your interaction.

What's all this talk about identity? I'm a human being. You're a human being. We happen to have some different DNA, we grew up in different families, we experienced varied outside influences, we had a variety of advantages and disadvantages, we made different choices...and I am created in God's image and you are created in God's image.

I'm suggesting we look beyond what we think of as identity, which brings me to Hillel's teaching. Hillel lived in the first century before the common era. His teachings are preserved in the Mishnah, a compilation of rabbinic discussion,

rulings and teachings. And these three sentences of his appear together in the Mishnah:

If I am not for myself who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

If not now when?

If I am not for myself who will be for me? If I don't realize that I in my entirety am created in God's image, who is gonna? If I accept that I am good at math, suck at tennis, sing all right, weigh more than I'd like to, get impatient, procrastinate, love being Jewish, can't run,--that this adds up to being created in God's image, whoa, such self-esteem. But if I go about comparing myself to every other person I know who is better at something than I am? Who will be for little old inadequate me? Each of us has to stick up for ourselves.

But If I am for myself and only for myself, what am I? A narcissist. Narcissist, hmm where have we seen an example of that lately? Narcissism, a grandiose sense of self-importance. Narcissism, the pursuit of gratification from vanity or egotistic admiration of one's own attributes. It is the extreme absence of "If I am only for myself, what am I?"

Unless I have a personal commitment to be there for those around me, I have a problem. For a community to be a community we can't choose who to help and who to ignore based on their particular idiosyncrasies. If someone is in need, if someone is lonely, we reach out. They don't have to be our best friend to need our attention. If not, we're not a true community.

For a country of immigrants that publicly acknowledges the historic value of taking the tired and the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore-- Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me, to shut its doors, to encourage persecution of human beings made in the

divine image who look different, dress different, have less in the bank, worship differently, love differently, than ? Well, we're falling apart!

Except, we have so many heroes we never even knew about. We're all becoming heroes, because the third line of Hillel's teaching is: **If not now when!** If I don't speak out, if I don't act right now on "If I am only for myself what am I," I am cutting off my core, my soul, the essence of my identity, which is "Made in the image of God."

The paragon of "If I am only for myself what am I/If not now when" is the Honorable James L. Robart, the U.S. District Court judge derided by the Narcissist in Chief as a "so-called judge" after blocking his executive order on immigration. Judge Robart is known for his conservative legal views, for a record of helping disadvantaged children that includes fostering six of them, and for dramatically declaring "black lives matter" during a hearing on police reform in 2015. Robart is the former president and trustee of the Seattle Children's Home, which handles mental health needs for children and their families throughout the city and state of Washington. As a lawyer he was active in representing the disadvantaged and in the independent representation of Southeast Asian refugees. During his confirmation hearing in 2004, Robart spoke about using the courts to help people who felt disenfranchised.

"I was introduced to people who many times felt that the legal system was stacked against them or was unfair," he said. "And one of the things, I think, that my time there helped accomplish was to show them that the legal system was set up for their benefit and that it could be, if properly used, an opportunity for them to seek redress if they had been wronged." Robart said that he would treat everyone in his courtroom with "dignity and respect."

You can see why he's my Hillel hero right now.

You know, you can use Hillel’s teaching in so many ways. I used it during a wedding ceremony three weeks ago to frame the relationship of two people with each other and within their community.

When I set out to use Hillel’s teaching in conjunction with Genesis 1 to talk about identity for this morning, my thoughts were on how in a community we each have to value ourselves, look out for each other, and act in a timely manner to help others. Because our true identity, deep within each of us, is as a reflection and a connection to the Divine, and we often confuse our external circumstances with our identity.

But over the past month—what can I say, you’ve all lived through it. You know this teaching is true. You have to stick up for yourself. You have to stick up for anyone and everyone being disparaged, disenfranchised, losing jobs, on the line to lose health care—the list is so long. And we have to do it now. And we have each other as a community who will be there for each other to do it together.

I want to leave you with encouraging words from the 20th century Jewish theologian, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who prayed with his feet at Selma with Dr Martin Luther King Jr. He said:

“Surrender to despair is surrender to evil. It is important to feel anxiety, it is sinful to wallow in despair. What we need is a total mobilization of the heart, intelligence and wealth for the purpose of love and justice. And: “The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity” May we remember that we are each created in God’s image and act accordingly.

Amen