

Life Beyond Laws: Creating a Culture of Diversity and Inclusion

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In New York City of the 1950s and 60s, the Stonewall Inn was one of the few venues that welcomed gay patrons. Laws at the time branded gays as second-class citizens yet here, at the Mafia-owned Stonewall Inn, doors were open to some of the poorest and most marginalized people in the community: drag queens, transgender people, feminine men, lesbians and homeless youth. In the early hours of 28 June 1969, police raided this place of refuge. And what followed, was a series of violent demonstrations by the city's gay community against the police. These uprisings became known as the Stonewall Riots and are considered to be a watershed moment for the gay liberation movement.

Since then, society and law have evolved dramatically. The people of Ireland challenged Catholic doctrine in favour of same-sex marriage in November of 2015, followed shortly thereafter by the United States of America, eventually Australia and even Taiwan, who just last Friday (24 May 2019), became the first Asian country to afford marriage equality to its citizens. And whilst twenty-seven countries now celebrate marriage equality, there remains an abundance of legal work still to be done across the globe for equality and recognition on the bases of gender, sexuality and more.

Laws are important. Our own tradition knows this to be true, too; at least a fifth of the Bible, the Book of Leviticus (Vayikra), is dedicated to laws designed to distinguish and govern Jewish life and society.

Some are inspiring and some are difficult to digest. For example, in this week's Torah portion, *Behukotai*, we read about a series of blessings that we will enjoy if we are faithful to the covenant with G-d, and a series of curses that we will endure if we are not.

Laws are technical; they create important structure, opportunity and definition for society and its citizens. But laws alone don't change the deeper issues - the values, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions that live and breathe in peoples' hearts and minds about 'the other.' The very things that make social equality difficult to achieve. The very things that underpin so much of the mental illness, social isolation, low self esteem and lack of purpose that we see in our community. And it's these

internal systems and mechanisms, which I posit, are the new frontier of our collective work around inclusion and diversity; for they give life to the deep-seated shame, prejudice and discrimination that so many endure. So whilst there is indeed so much to celebrate, *full* equality remains an aspiration.

Interestingly, this week's Torah portion is the final chapter of Leviticus. We will soon begin the Book of Numbers (*Bamidbar*) and resume the story of our wandering in the desert. Perhaps G-d knew too, that laws alone don't create a meritorious society. Perhaps G-d knew that people need to transition their hearts and minds first.

In our case, it was our transition from slavery to freedom; a generational mindset that needed to shift before we could enter The Promised Land as a free people and for which some say, we were allotted 40 years of wandering— 40 years to rediscover, question, grapple with and change what *was* in our hearts and minds.

So here we are, 50 years on from the Stonewall Riots and tomorrow will mark the beginning of Pride Month; a time to honour those who came before us in the battle for human rights, a moment to celebrate the achievements and contributions of the LGBTI community and perhaps an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to the advancement of an equality that spans just not sexuality and gender, but also race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, class and so much more.

But how exactly do we make further progress, beyond the law? How do we get beneath the surface to reconfigure our internal landscapes?

There are 3 ideas I want to briefly suggest tonight:

Firstly, to quote a poem I often read in our *siddur*, "Pray as if everything depended on G-d. Act as if everything depended on you." **We all have a role to play.** So often, we place our hopes on authority figures to create change. And we blame *them* when it is not fully achieved. Maybe it's G-d for some, or a company CEO for others, a captain of a sports team, a parent, a Rabbi, the government or even a member of a given disadvantaged community. Somehow we look to *them* to set the standard, to take action, to raise the bar.

And yet, leadership is non-positional. We don't need a fancy title in order to exercise our influence and creativity. We are all authorised to exercise leadership and to effect meaningful change in our social, familial, professional and communal circles. Rosa Parks knew this when she sat down on a bus in Alabama in 1955 to stand up for racial equality. It is time for us to own our part in the system of change; to realise and accept that our actions - and inactions - all contribute to our reality. As someone wise once told me, "you're not struck in traffic, you are the traffic."

Which leads me to my second thought... that we when we see ourselves as change makers *in* the system, we begin to understand how valuable our voice can be. So point number two is – **own your voice and engage other voices**. Use your voice to have a conversation with someone different to you, ask a question to break through an echo chamber of similar thought, stand up to an injustice, speak up for those otherwise silenced. Challenge an idea, be open to new ones, and be aware of your judgements and the impact of your words. To change hearts and minds, we need to first traverse the boundaries that keep us divided. Through interpersonal engagement, we grow our appreciation for the other and in turn, our hearts grow too. Empathy, trust, compassion, listening and understanding – these are some of the vital ingredients needed to remould our internal beliefs and assumptions about the other. And they are generated through intentional and respectful engagement.

And thirdly, **uphold and amplify those Jewish values that fortify a culture of equality**. Our tradition holds that we were all present at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, 'all of us then and all of us yet to be born'. From this we can deduce that inclusion is not just a nice idea, but a Jewish value too. That every person was present because every person is equally valued - every voice, every soul, every human experience. The Gemara teaches us that when Rabbinic law clashes with human dignity, we privilege and honour human dignity because, according to our Sages, to embarrass or humiliate another person is akin to a crime. Judaism holds at its centre the value and dignity of life. As it is written in the Talmud, "*Kol Yisrael aravim zeh bazeh*," All of Israel is responsible for one another. We have a duty to protect each other's dignity. It begins with us and it calls on each of us to be a Stonewall Inn for others; to show compassion for the stranger, to embrace the other, to find the beauty in each human life.

Our task is not an easy one, but an important one. Just as we managed to overcome the shackles of slavery in Egypt, so too will we succeed in overturning the limitations of exclusivity, privilege and oppression. Together, we will form a new language that honours the other and creates space for difference to flourish. Together, we will find ways of celebrating the uniqueness of each individual and allow their bright colours to be woven in amongst of tapestry of human life.

Perhaps then, when our legal efforts are complimented by our interpersonal and social advances, we will really come to know equality. And perhaps then, we will be free and proud.

May the memory of all those who fought for equality before us forever be a blessing. May they long mobilise and inspire us to continue *this* long walk to freedom.

Shabbat Shalom.