

*'Either Friendship or Death':*  
*Rethinking the Journey of Inclusion & Belonging in an Unforgiving World*  
*Rabbi Claudia Kreiman*  
*Yom Kippur Day 5783*

I am sure that like me, many of us feel at times that we live in a very unforgiving world. We tend to be unforgiving of ourselves, too, when we are all on a road of learning and growth.

I feel this especially around language, as a non-native English speaker. It also feels as if we live in a binary world, divided between black and white, good and bad, right and wrong. But these concrete divisions do not allow for the nuance and complexities of humanity, our behaviors, and our feelings.

It feels at times, that when we make a mistake, without the intention of hurting someone — like when we say the wrong thing, when we use a word that we are no longer supposed to use, when we quote someone with problematic views on particular issues, when we have an opinion that is different from others — we are both quick to be judged and quick to judge others without leaving room for the learning and growing we desire.

**How do we disrupt this cycle of judgment?**

**How do we create new paradigms for progress and change?**

**How do we balance accountability with forgiveness?**

**How do we strive for repair without sacrificing the integrity of relationships?**

These questions feel especially present on Yom Kippur. So today, I want to offer some ideas and practices to help us move forward together.

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In Jewish law, there is a concept called *machmir*, being strict or rigid about following a rule and *makbel*, being lenient regarding a rule. Often, these two concepts collide: Every time we choose to be rigid about something, we end up being lenient about something else; and vice-versa.

There is a well-known story about this. One Shabbat, a student goes to the rabbi, the student feels sick with a bit of a headache and a fever, clearly not something dangerous and asks the rabbi if they can go to the hospital on Shabbat. The rabbi suggests Advil, some tea, rest a bit, but the student is adamant, and continues asking if they can go to the hospital, which would mean to get into a vehicle, something that is prohibited on Shabbat.

Eventually the rabbi gives the student permission to go. The other *talmidim*, students, come to the rabbi and ask — why are you so lenient, *makbel* on the rules of Shabbat to which the rabbi answers, I am not *makbel* on the rules of Shabbat; I am *machmir*, I am strict, on the rules of *pikuach nefesh*, of saving a life.

Every time we choose to be strict about something — every time we exercise rigidity — we end up being lenient about something else.

As a community, TBZ is committed to inclusion. Our mission statement begins with the words: **TBZ is an independent, inclusive Jewish congregation.** We pride ourselves on being inclusive, we are constantly working towards more ways to do that. To include people of different backgrounds, to include people of different abilities, to include people of all racial and ethnic identities, to include all genders and sexual orientations.

Yet, we are quick to assert a moral view toward those who think differently than us, even if the difference is small.

I have discovered in my work that, sometimes, widening our parameters for inclusion can paradoxically lead people to feel threatened — or simply not comfortable. I know I am not alone in grappling with this, as a leader.

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This might sound really blunt, but **I am not sure that full inclusion is possible without the honest recognition that every act of inclusion might also be an act of exclusion.** Every choice we make has a cost, and that's ok, but what is important is to face this with humility and integrity.

There are many examples in our community, small and big, where people feel included or excluded. Too much Hebrew, too little Hebrew, focus too much on adult programming, too much kids stuff, and so on, and of course around how best to make our physical space and programming inclusive to people of all abilities.

We are a pretty diverse community, with people who have different backgrounds and expectations of what a synagogue community is about. In the same week, I can hear opposite requests from what people expect from this same community. Each of these requests has a story and a person who is longing to belong.

As Susan Cain wrote in her new book *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*, “Longing is the great gateway to belonging.”

My explanation to those who come to me feeling excluded is often that we might not be able to include everyone at all times, but hopefully we are creating enough opportunities for people to feel at home. Co-existing together in a community means necessarily having to compromise. Sometimes we have to give up some of what we want in order to be part of a more inclusive community and society.

This week, a beautiful, incredibly moving video<sup>1</sup> came out through the Jewish Covid Resilience Network<sup>2</sup> with words and voices of chronically ill, high-risk, and disabled Jews. It was moving in so many ways. It served as a call to the Jewish community to actively make choices that will make the Jewish community more welcoming to those who are most physically vulnerable.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OVD7zTgx24>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.covidresilience.org>

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I was so moved listening to this. The video ends with some concrete demands of how to show disabled people that we care about their presence; that we care whether they live or die. Most of these demands included things that we are already doing at TBZ — like maximizing ventilation and having hybrid and virtual programming.

The one item that we are not doing at this point is continuing to require KN95/N95 masks. Of course, my Jewish guilt kicked up right away and I started to question if we are as inclusive as we think we are, as we say we are, and if we are doing right by this community.

But then I thought of my own children and children of friends and congregants who are struggling with mental health, and social challenges as a result of the last few years of masking and zoom school — challenges that they will continue to face and need to overcome for a long time. I thought of the elderly person who came to me and said, “I know I will eventually die of something, just let me come to shul, and sing and see your face and let me show you my face. I don’t want to spend the last years of my life masked.”

I also thought of the people we are actively excluding now, who have come to speak with me, who have chosen for their own personal reasons, painful reasons based on their own lived experiences, not to get vaccinated and as of now because of choices we have made at TBZ to be most inclusive, they are excluded and cannot come in-person.

**So, if full, real inclusion is not really possible; if every act of inclusion comes at the expense of something else, what do we do?** How do we decide toward what we are strict and toward whom we are lenient? Are there other options beyond the binary of “this” or “that”?

Perhaps the answer lies in something else. On a principle much more profound and lasting than inclusivity.

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I think the answer is in a concept in our tradition, often used or understood mostly in the context of studying Torah, but that has a profound meaning and teaching for how to live our lives.

או תְּכַרְוֶתָּא אוּ מִיתוּתָּא.  
Either friendship or death.

The concept of *hevrutah* might be familiar to many of you — it is the concept of a partner, of a friend, traditionally a torah learning partner who you are in a relationship with learning Jewish text. *Hevrutah* is usually not a one time encounter, though usually we use the concept for one time learning sessions, but is a lasting relationship centered in learning and in deep personal connection.

This concept appears in the Talmud in the Tractate of *Ta'anit*<sup>3</sup>, following the well known story of *Honi Hame'agel*, the circle maker, that we tell around Tu BiShvat. Honi, who sleeps for seventy years, wakes up into a world that doesn't recognize him, that does not see him, he has no partnership, no friendship. He is lonely. Honi becomes very upset, prays for mercy and dies. This becomes an example of this concept, או תְּכַרְוֶתָּא אוּ מִיתוּתָּא - Either friendship or death. Perhaps we can understand it as either being in relationship, being part of real community, or there is nowhere to go, there is no growth, there is no possibility.

A quick story:

One afternoon, Rav Tiferet and I were driving home from TBZ. She began to share with me an encounter that she'd recently had with a mutual acquaintance.

“I feel like they were so quick to shut me down. And then you said the exact same thing and they listened!”

“But, maybe they just didn't hear you. It was difficult to pronounce that word correctly.”

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<sup>3</sup> Ta'anit 23a

“That could be... but even still, they disregarded me twice, in two separate instances. It feels like they were disregarding my words because I’m black.”

“I don’t think so, I know that person and they’re not like that.”

A few weeks later, Rav Tiferet lovingly shared with me that my response in this instance was a white supremacy culture characteristic, something we’d learned about in our recent DEI<sup>4</sup> training experience. In this instance, I responded to her from my own perspective and understanding of the world as a white woman without noticing that her experience as a black woman was very different and in doing so I silenced her experience. It was hard for me to recognize this as a behavior based on racism, but mostly I felt terrible, guilty, like a “bad person.” I did not mean to hurt Rav Tiferet, I did not even know that could be hurtful. We spent some time talking about it and I was able to get beyond my initial feelings, which may have closed me off to the process of learning. I could have called her “sensitive” or figured she would “get over it.” But, because we are in a relationship, I was able to learn something new about ways I respond to things that would never have occurred to me until I listened to someone else who has a different experience and perspective. This is the value of relationship and caring.

So, the call is to be in a relationship, to be in conversation, to be in true *hevrutah*, to learn together, that is the way to become as inclusive as possible. To hear and understand people and their needs, even when we can’t fully meet them, together we can work toward compromise. To hear and understand others’ stories, even or especially when so different from us. To learn from each other. To be inclusive is to be committed to each other even when we can’t do it all.

In the words of Ron Wolfson from his book “Relational Judaism”:

“What really matters is that we care about the people we seek to engage. When we genuinely care about people, we will not only welcome them; we will listen to their

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<sup>4</sup> Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

stories, we will share ours, and we will join together to build a Jewish community that enriches our lives”<sup>5</sup>

So how do we do this? The work of Teshuva is perhaps the path to it. Here are some suggestions:

- **Acknowledge what you notice.** Where do you observe places of exclusion around you? Who is being excluded as you include? Are there voices of exclusion around you that you are choosing to ignore or ridicule?
- **Clarify your own values.** What is important to you?
- **Be accountable, but don't be consumed by guilt.** Take responsibility for how previous exclusion has been painful. How could you have done better?
- **Embrace the feeling of productive discomfort.** We might not always “get it right” in our relationships — and that’s okay — but being on a journey of learning and change requires us to face what makes us uncomfortable, and be curious enough to strive to do better.
- **Think beyond the binary.** Appreciate the nuances and complexities of building a more inclusive society — and commit to deepening your understanding.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg in her new book “On Repentance and Repair, Making Amends in an Unapologetic World” writes:

“The work of repentance is, in many ways, the work of looking outside ourselves, looking with an empathetic eye at what we have done, letting it matter to us, and trying earnestly to figure out how we can both meaningfully address it and ensure that it never happens again. This is, in some ways, an act of tenderness, of extending

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<sup>5</sup> From the Introduction

ourselves to care for others, of giving ourselves the time and attention we deserve to grow, of investing in our own learning and capacity to heal.”<sup>6</sup>

As we engage in the work of Teshuva, today and every day, may we do it by building true relationships, true hevrutah; through humility and honesty, and with the knowledge that while the journey for belonging may never be complete, we are truly never alone.

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<sup>6</sup> Page 59