

Being proud of individual diversity within our community

This week I went to see the musical, the Book of Mormon, at the Palace Theatre. I am sure quite a few of you have seen the musical or heard about it. For those that don't know, the Book of Mormon is a satirical musical about Mormonism from Salt Lake City. The play charts the journey of two missionaries who are sent to Uganda. The Book of Mormon pokes fun at organised religion, as well as attempting to satirise white colonial missions to Africa. Whilst the show has a huge following it has attracted a great deal of criticism – accused of racism for its stereotypes of Africa. Whilst I did enjoy the show and the skills of the performers I did wonder – is this ok? Who wrote this play? Whose is it for? Who does it belong to? When is it ok to laugh? Are we too easily offended or are there red lines?

Judaism has a strong tradition of humour and we are known at laughing at ourselves. In fact, not that it's meant to be a joke, but we've seen in this week's Torah portion that God points the finger at the Israelites and calls them, repeatedly, a stiff-necked people. Many of our jokes centre on this perception and stereotype. Let's look at one such joke that rests on the stereotype of the Jews as stiff-necked people and, of course, the stereotype of the Jewish Mother:

The first Jewish President is elected.

He calls his Mother: "Mama, I've won the elections, you've got to come to the swearing-in ceremony."

"I don't know, what would I wear?"

"Don't worry. I'll send you a dressmaker."

"But I only eat kosher food."

"Mama, I am going to be the president, I can get you kosher food."

"But how will I get there?"

"I'll send a limo, just come Mama."

"Ok, Ok. I'll come if it makes you happy."

The great day comes and Mama is seated between the Supreme Court Justices and the Future Cabinet members, she nudges the gentleman on her right. "You see that boy, the one with his hand on the Bible...his brother's a doctor."

Maybe this joke is ok because I'm a rabbi telling it in the context of a synagogue. Or maybe it's not. What are the red lines?

The American researcher, storyteller, and one of my gurus, Brene Brown, in her book, *Braving the Wilderness*, writes ‘there is a line. It’s etched from dignity.’ That the line is drawn at physical and emotional safety. And the LGBTQ plus community know these lines well as they have experience them time and time again.

Firstly, Brene Brown says we must be physically safe. Members of our community have been subject to homophobic abuse – so much so that a family were forced to leave their one. We’ve seen headlines this year with two women verbally and physically assaulted on a London bus after they were seen kissing. The Orlando nightclub shooting in 2016 that killed 49 people and wounded 53. Everyone must be afforded physical safety and the perpetrators brought to swift and thorough justice.

Being emotionally safe may feel less clear to us. Brene Brown explains that we are not talking about getting your feelings hurt or being forced to listen to dissenting opinions but it is about dehumanising language and behaviour. We create enemy images, see people as other, take sides and lose our ability to be empathetic and listen. We know where dehumanisation can lead – as once as you see people as subhuman, we don’t need to apply our moral code to them. In our world of polarisation and with the fertile ground of social media we have platforms for our dehumanising behaviour. As Brene Brown writes, ‘on Twitter and Facebook we can rapidly push the people with whom we disagree into the dangerous territory of moral exclusion, with little or no accountability, and often in complete anonymity.’ We can see this in our Torah portion with its colonial agenda of painting other nations as wicked and justifying God’s promise to utterly destroy them and wipe them out.

On this weekend of pride – a time of celebration and protest – what can we do to call out dehumanising language?

Firstly, to those people who have been oppressed and rejected by society or families we loudly and clearly say – you are one of us, we are inextricably bound. We recognise that ‘beneath our uniqueness we are all bound together by our common humanity.’ We march on pride – ally ourselves with those still fighting for freedom and say – we are with you.

A painful example of this can be found in the papers this week – the headline read – ‘two men verbally abused and threatened to kill Alex Hancock after he hung the pride flag at his home in Old Trafford, Greater Manchester, on

Monday.’ Unacceptable. Those two men put aside the ancient moral code – ‘do not kill’ because they othered Alex. What his neighbours did in response was beautiful. They came together and all flew rainbow flags from their windows. They spoke to the press and said - "What we've done to support him just shows it's important these days for communities to stick together and actually stand up in the face of hate.

"We've seen the rise of xenophobia... homophobia... racism. It's really important now for communities to support those that others perceive as different and others target for hate attacks".

Secondly, we look at our own language. As Brene Brown says – ‘when the president of the United States calls women dogs, we should get chills down our spine and resistance flowing through our veins. When people call the president of the United States a pig, we should reject that language regardless of our politics and demand discourse that doesn’t make people subhuman.’ ‘When we engage in dehumanising rhetoric or promote dehumanising images, we diminish our own humanity in the process. When we desecrate their divinity, we desecrate our own and we betray our faith.’ And, yes, this includes jokes that stereotype or dehumanise – we listen carefully and choose our words seriously.

Thirdly, we breath in and take courage in politely and firmly calling people out whenever they use dehumanising language – even when, and especially when, it is from friends and family with whom you disagree. We take time to listen to them and hear their intentions and views and then we step into the wilderness, talk from the heart and try to unpack why that language is troubling. We hear so we can be heard. We are generous of spirit and firm in resolve.

Aleynu – it is on us, in our tradition of *tikkun olam*/repairing the world and championing the rights of the oppressed, to shout from the rooftops both as LGBTQ plus people and allies against dehumanising language and behaviour, homophobia and transphobia. To love the stranger as ourselves. To pray with our feet. To celebrate and to protest. *Ken Yehi Ratzon – may this be God’s will.*

Shabbat Eikev
Shabbat Pride Sermon
23 Av 5779/24 August 5779
Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen