

Of unity deeper than shared purpose

With the conclusion of Passover, we've dutifully transmitted once more our people's origin story by recounting our freedom from slavery through God's mighty hand and outstretched arm, transitioning from plagues to the crossing of the sea and recalling the onset of our wandering in the wilderness toward the ultimate moment of revelation that will be marked by the holiday of Shavuot. Embodied in the song of "Dayeinu" that we sang on Seder night is the reminder that each milestone in our people's journey throughout the Exodus narrative is worthy of song, praise and thanks (*Hallel*).

However, there is one verse in Dayeinu that, on the surface, is hard to appreciate: "If God had brought us close to Mount Sinai and not given us the Torah, it would have been enough for us." Of what value is there to being brought close to Mount Sinai absent a subsequent revelation? By design, we don't even know which mountain it was. What was so special about this moment in time that it receives a grateful Dayeinu?



D'VAR TORAH

By Rabbi Mordechai Harris

Rashi explains (Exodus 19:2) that when the Jewish people encamped at Mount Sinai, the Torah describes that action with language indicative of a singular actor and not a collective, which Rashi understands is indicative that we were "as one person, with one heart" (*k'ish echad, b'lev echad*). This unity was foundational to the receiving of the Torah but also had a value and greatness independent of the Torah and revelation.

Rav Yitzchok Hutner (Drashot on Pesach, Maamar 41) notes an important, if subtle, contrast between Rashi's description of the Israelites at Mount Sinai and Rashi's description of the Egyptians as they cornered the Israelites with their back to the water just prior to the sea's split. There too (Exodus 14:10), the biblical text utilizes singular language to describe the Egyptians, who were "with one heart, as one person" (*b'lev echad, k'ish echad*). In the Exodus narrative, the Egyptians were also unified as a people, but, as Rav Hutner explains, the Egyptians' unity was first and foremost due to prior

agreement on a cause (power, the enslavement of the Israelites, etc.) and that agreement of purpose is what served as the foundation of their unity. When their agreement on purpose dissipated, their identity as a singular people also disappeared, which is why Egyptian society was set back so dramatically following the Exodus.

By contrast, Jewish unity is different. It's founded first and foremost through our shared and deeply internalized identity as ONE people. Viewing our fellow Jews as critical and inseparable extensions of our own personal identity, our shared identity propels us into taking collective action where our goals naturally align. Jewish unity, in its fullest expression, doesn't fracture at disagreement, because it's deeper than simple transactional or tactical alignment.

Between now and Shavuot, in the span between the Egyptian tactical unity at the sea and the profound expression of ontological unity from which Revelation was made possible, it is incumbent on all of us to strengthen our conception of, and commitment to, Jewish peoplehood. At a time when our differences are on full display, and where we concernedly

witness the clash of tribal factions from our stiff-necked people passionately at odds with each other, we must, perhaps more than ever, recall that our unity goes deeper than agreement, and it is only from that anchor of unconditional unity that we can hope to build our path forward together.

In the spirit of the above, Rabbi Mordechai Harris is proud to be a member of The Rabbinic Association of Greater Dallas (RAGD), a group that by its founding principles is consciously made up of individuals with intractable disagreements on core theological and philosophical issues, who nevertheless make it a priority to meet regularly out of recognition that we share a mutual obligation to care for, inspire and lead one Jewish people.

Rabbi Harris is further blessed to serve our community as chief impact officer and rabbi in residence for the Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas, an organization that embraces and champions the fact that we are one Jewish people no matter our differences, and from that seat of committed unity, works tirelessly to promote a singular mission, one capable of being shared by every member of our Jewish community, to help ensure the continuity of a strong and vibrant Jewish community in Dallas, Israel and throughout the world.

Advocacy in action in Austin for the LGBTQ+ community

Advocacy was high on the priority list in March for Makom Shelanu Congregation in Fort Worth and Beth El Binah in Dallas. Representing both congregations, I, puck glass, Richard Allen and Cantor Don Croll woke up at the crack of dawn on March 8 to drive to the State Capitol for TENT's (Transgender Education Network of Texas) Advocacy Day in Austin.

The goal was to help persuade legislators to vote against the 140 anti-LGBTQ+ bills filed this session. If passed into law, these bills, covering issues such as healthcare, education, identity documents and religious refusal would pose a real and serious threat to the lives and well-being of the LGBTQ+ (and especially transgender) community. We know personally of families moving out of state to avoid investigation, separation



GUEST COLUMN

By Cantor Sheri Allen

from their children and potential prosecution for simply supporting their loved ones' desire to live authentically and receive basic healthcare.

Our contingent spent the day learning about effective lobbying strategies and having conversations with staffers and legislators, sharing our personal stories and dispelling the misinformation out there about what gender affirming care looks like — while stressing that best practices medical care for transgender youth is supported by every leading medical association, including the American Medical Association, The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychiatric Association.

Two weeks later, I made a return trip — joined by Makom Shelanu members Anntoinette Baker and Rachel Gollay — for

All in for Equality Advocacy Day sponsored by Equality Texas, TENT, Texas Freedom Network, ACLU Lambda Legal and the Human Rights Campaign. We joined 700 people from across the state for another round of training, legislator visits and a spirited rally on the Capitol steps. It was an empowering and uplifting experience to be present among so many others who were passionate about protecting LGBTQIA+ lives.

The stakes are getting higher every day as some of the most egregious bills are advancing and being referred to committees for hearings and votes. Just last week, SB14, (the Senate Bill which would prevent youth — even those currently receiving lifesaving healthcare — from accessing it or continuing it) passed out of the full Senate. It's companion bill, HB1686, is still pending in committee. And SB8, the "Don't Say Gay/Trans" Bill, calling for a total K-12 ban on instruction, guidance, activities and program-

ming regarding sexual orientation and gender identity, passed out of the full Senate. SB250, which not only prohibits physicians from providing essential care for transgender youth, but also seeks to ban insurance companies from covering such treatment, was also voted out of committee.

If these bills become law, it will have catastrophic consequences for families of LGBTQ+ trans youth, especially when it come to healthcare. Without the opportunity to get the healthcare they desperately need, the suicide rates in the LGBTQ community — which are high enough already — will just keep escalating. Richard and I credit gender affirming surgery for literally saving our son Preston's life.

As Jews we know that an attack on one community is an attack on all of us — and we are taught to never stand idly by when our neighbors are in danger. If you would like to

take action to prevent the passage of these bills it only takes a few minutes to call and/or write your State Senator and House Representative and tell them to vote "no" on all of this harmful anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.

To find out who represents you: <https://bit.ly/3Umj1wh>.

To keep up to date on the progress of these and other bills, Equality Texas has a bill tracker you can access: <https://bit.ly/43oldIG>.

There will be many more trips to the Capitol, more letters to write, more calls to make before this legislative session is over. I left the Capitol hoping that our collective voice and message — upholding the dignity and sanctity of all human beings — was heard. Time will tell.

Sheri Allen is Cantor and co-founder of Makom Shelanu Congregation in Fort Worth, and a member of the Conservative Movement's Social Justice Committee, where she co-chairs their LGBTQ working group.