



In This Together

By: Rabbi Adam Greenwald

Simchat Torah is a holiday of re-reading. We complete our annual cycle and begin again with the Story of Creation. I am a big re-reader. I love returning to the texts that move me most and discovering in them new resonance based on the state of my life or the state of our world.

Nearly every year, I re-read the most superb moral essay of the last century, Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. King wrote the essay in response to an open letter published by eight white Alabama clergymen, including one rabbi, who bemoaned the fact that their community had been, in their words, "confronted by a series of demonstrations led by outsiders." King responded to their criticism with words that ring every bit as prophetic as those of Isaiah or Jeremiah: "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

Returning to those words, I feel viscerally how this past year has stretched and frayed that already threadbare garment of mutuality, almost to its tearing point.

A year ago, I would walk in our neighborhood and see countless handwritten signs in windows praising essential workers and chalk messages on sidewalks to comfort scared children, all invariably including the phrase: "We're in this Together."

Somehow, over the past many months, those signs and messages started to disappear, or remain tattered and sun-bleached and nearly forgotten. It's a sad mirror of the way that American flags bloomed overnight in the aftermath of 9-11, twenty years ago now if you can believe it, then faded away again into partisan discord. It seems we can only maintain solidarity for so long, and then exhaustion sets in and we return to our narrow spheres of particular concern.

As I re-read King's message, I was struck that our essential human task, the one on which our very survival as a species may depend, is to figure out how to sustain a sense of empathy and shared responsibility for the long road.

This is, I believe, the single most crucial role that religion can play in the contemporary world. For all its many sins, no force on earth has consistently proven more powerful for weaving together what Dr. King called the beloved community than religion. All of the world's great spiritual traditions teach a common message that we are individually bit players in a drama far beyond our imagination. That our responsibility is not first and foremost to ourselves, but to shared dreams and collective visions. For all the ways that religion can be perverted to drive us apart, at its best, it can open our hearts to see each other, as the Torah we read on this holiday describes, as all equally made in the image of God ([Genesis 1:26-27](#)).

When the authors of our most ancient rabbinic text, the Mishnah, considered the implications of the Torah's first parsha, they ask: "Why was it that God started with one single person at the very beginning?" ([Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5](#)). They offer three, interconnected answers:

First, to teach us the infinite preciousness of every life, that out of one can emerge an entire world, and therefore we are all obligated to protect each other at all costs.

Second, since we all share a common ancestor, that makes us family to one another. Family doesn't mean we'll always get along or see eye to eye; but family has each other's backs when the going gets tough. Genesis calls us to an awareness of universal kinship, that our being "in this together" isn't just metaphorical but biological.

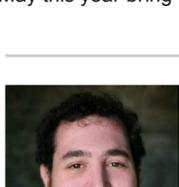
And, finally, so that each unique human being should be able to say *b'shvili n'vrach haolam* – for my sake, the world was created. Not that the world was created *for my benefit*, but *for my sake* - that each of us is to play an irreplaceable role in the human drama, that we each bring something special to a shared table, that without our light, the world is a lot less bright.

Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African-American poet to win the Pulitzer Prize, wrote the following lines:

we are each other's
harvest:
we are each other's
business:
we are each other's magnitude and bond.

At the beginning of a fresh, new year, let's recommit to the Torah's vision. We are in this together. We are each other's business. Your safety, your thriving, your joy is my responsibility – and mine, yours. There's no more necessary and urgent teaching for our shared moment than that.

May this year bring blessing to you and all of us.



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