

Love your neighbor as yourself. A verse from tonight's Torah portion. This verse is the center verse of the center book of the Torah, Leviticus, section we call the Holiness Code. We call it the Holiness Code because there is a refrain in this chapter. You shall be holy for I, the Lord your G-d, am Holy.

Love your neighbor as yourself. When someone who wanted to convert to Judaism asked Hillel if he would describe the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot, he answered that we should love our neighbors as ourselves, the rest is commentary go and study.

But what does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself? How do we do that? The portion gives us clues to that as well. "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare or gather the fallen fruit; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am the Lord your G-d."

It tells us not withhold the wages of a laborer overnight. It tells us to not render an unfair decision, to not show favor to the poor or deference to the rich, to not put a stumbling block before the blind. This emphasis on the fair treatment of all—the widow, the orphan the stranger, the poor, the marginalized is so important in Judaism it is echoed some 36 times in our tradition.

Our tradition is very clear—we are to see the Divine in each of us. Each of us is created b'tzelem elohim, in the image of G-d.

This month is National Fair Housing Month. The Interfaith Clergy Association to which I belong decided that this is an important enough topic that many of the churches and our synagogue are choosing to talk about this specific way to show "Love your neighbor as yourself" either this weekend or next. A letter to the editor which we have signed has gone to the local papers as well because it is not enough to talk about this, but we felt we needed to do something, to become advocates, to work for systemic change.

But why do we care? We have access to housing—whatever we can afford. Let me tell you a little story. Some kids when they were young went to services with their parents on Shabbat. Not me. Growing up in Evanston, Northwestern University's college town, I was much more likely to be taken to a rally for civil rights, instead—why? Precisely because I was Jewish and that's what Jews did. We welcomed the widow, the orphan, the stranger. We integrated the public schools. We played with blacks. We had company for every holiday—Jewish or not. But at some point my mother tried to rent the community house at the local park for a father-daughter Brownie tea. The answer was no. They didn't want those people to use the building. So she ran for park commissioner when she discovered that by using the same logic they hadn't put out the swings or the benches, because they didn't want those people sitting on them. And even though she lost, they did put out the benches and the swings and did have our father daughter tea.

At about the same time, the country passed the Fair Housing Act as part of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 which prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of dwellings, and in other housing-related transactions, based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status and the handicapped (persons with disability). Much of that legislation was written on the conference room table of the Religious Action Center, the lobbying arm for the Reform Movement and we, as Reform Jews can be justifiably proud of that history.

When we moved to Grand Rapids, a town that was less than 1% Jewish and 85% Dutch Reform, we were told that we probably didn't want to live in Holland, a Lake Michigan community that is very conservative, very Christian and very blond. They didn't think we would be comfortable. We wound up buying a house in the preppy suburb in a nice but newer neighborhood and ironically on our block was the one black family, the one Asian family, (they owned the Chinese restaurant) and three other Jewish families. My parents went on to sell real estate and recently there has been a flurry of newspaper stories about redlining in Grand Rapids in the seventies—but it had much more to do with steering black families to the inner city, we called it Center City, than what happened on our block.

So what does this have to do with today? This can't possible still exist. Unfortunately it does and while it is a very subtle form of racism, it happens all too often. Over 10,000 cases were filed federally in 2006, the highest number ever. It is not limited to racism, but discrimination against the disabled, immigrants, the gay and lesbian community and the poor, the very ones that this week's Torah portion with its emphasis on fair treatment for all, tells us we should treat with dignity and respect, that we should love as we love ourselves.

One out of every five Americans has some type of physical disability, yet there continues to be an acute shortage of housing to meet their needs. National studies show that while progress has been made, racial discrimination in housing still exists at unacceptable levels in our country. One out of every four or five Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, or Native Americans still faces discrimination in renting, buying, or financing housing. Again, these are the national numbers

Low-income people, seniors and the disabled, seeking to purchase, refinance, or secure a reverse mortgage, are often targets for predatory lenders or loan fraud. Predatory lenders take advantage of borrowers with a variety of abusive practices such as charging excessive interest rates or loan fees. We are now watching the collapse of some of that industry, and in its collapse families whose mortgages are being foreclosed are the very ones getting the most hurt.

Illegal housing discrimination can take many forms, again, some quite subtle: realtors showing apartments or homes only in certain neighborhoods, advertising housing only to preferred groups of people, denials of property insurance, discriminatory property appraisals, or refusals to make reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities.

You think maybe this is only a national problem. That it doesn't happen here? You think maybe this isn't local? Think again. When my husband and I first started working on some of these issues we were appalled to learn that a local pizza franchise refused to deliver to one of the rectories in downtown Lowell. They had redlined the district, fearing to send their delivery cars in because it was perceived to be unsafe. Ironically, their district included not only the rectory where our friends lived, but also the main Lowell Police Station. Now pizza delivery may not be one of our unalienable rights but it was symbolic and was discriminatory based on fear of the other, the stranger rather than on facts.

More recently, the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston, a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting fair housing rights, conducted a study of housing discrimination against home seekers in the greater Lowell and Merrimack Valley area rental markets in the summer of 2004. The audit tested for discrimination against African American, Asian, Latinos, and families with children. The center conducted 66 matched pair tests at 40 locations, both real estate offices and property management offices. Overall, testing showed evidence of discrimination 31 of the 66 paired tests conducted, or 47%.

The realtors I know and spoke with that work in the Merrimack Valley say that they are trained specifically about fair housing law, and know it is illegal and that they don't do it. Wouldn't do it. That is the good news.

The bad news is that this is battle we still must fight—both access to housing of our choice and access to affordable housing. The battles over 40B housing in some of our communities unfortunately reflects not only economics and “preserving our way of life” or quality of life or property values as it frequently gets couched in letters to the editor, but racism itself. The Not in My Backyard mentality must change as the need for affordable housing is huge and continues to grow.

Our job, a people called on to be holy, to act in the image of G-d as this week's Torah portion teaches us is to continue to be a watchdog, to not rest on our laurels of the civil rights movement, to speak up when our neighbors are unfairly unable to get access to the housing they deserve, to not become slum landlords and discriminate against the poor, to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to judge our neighbors fairly whether rich or poor, to treat our neighbors as ourselves. To love our neighbors as ourselves. Then we will be able say, “We are holy because the Lord our God is Holy.” Shabbat shalom.

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