RACE AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

LEARNING TO SEE EACH OTHER AS FAMILY

TORAH BLESSING

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Source Texts:

Rabbi Buchdahl addresses issues of race and racism within the Jewish community. She encourages us to move from an identity model created by our enemies to one that aligns with how God sees us.

Invention of our Enemies

Although there are several times when enemy peoples defined Jews by race, the Nuremberg Laws from Nazi Germany are perhaps the most dangerous and infamous example. Below is a visual representation of these laws, which defined a Jew as anyone with one Jewish grandparent, regardless of conversion.

As Rabbi Buchdahl said, the state of Israel adopted this same racial definition of Jewish identity when establishing its immigration policy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

(a) What do you think about the decision of the Israeli government to adopt this definition of Jewish identity? Would you have made the same decision in their shoes?

(b) The concept of Jewish features also grew under the Nazi regime. How much is the idea of “a Jewish look” today linked to the caricatures made by our enemies?
(c) How does it make you feel to see the influence of our enemies on Jewish identity? Can you imagine an alternative approach to defining Jewish identity with more positive roots?

The Myth of Homogeneity

Rabbi Buchdahl acknowledges that heredity is both important and meaningful, and that being a link in a chain that extends all the way back to Sinai is a powerful image. Still, it is important to remember that this chain was never defined by blood alone. There were always ways to join the Jewish people and the covenant. Perhaps the most famous example from the Tanach is that of Ruth:

Ruth 1:1-9, 14-16

(1) In the days when the chieftains ruled, there was a famine in the land; and a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab. (2) The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife’s name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. They came to the country of Moab and remained there. (3) Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. (4) They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years. (5) Then those two—Mahlon and Chilion—also died; so the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband. (6) She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab she had heard that the LORD had taken note of His people and given them food. (7) Accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living; and they set out on the road back to the land of Judah. (8) But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Turn back, each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me! (9) May the LORD grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband!” And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping... (14) They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her. (15) So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law.” (16) But Ruth replied, “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
(a) How does this story interact with your ideas about Jewish heritage? How does it interact with other texts you might have learned about Jewish continuity?
(b) Why do you think the text mentions Moab and the fact that Ruth is a Moabite woman so often?
(c) Is it significant that Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David? If not, why not? If so, what do you learn from this fact?

Family and B’rit

Rabbi Buchdahl proposes a different, more inclusive, and more ancient way of defining Jewish identity. She references this excerpt from the Torah portion N’tzavim to uplift the idea of peoplehood as defined by family and b’rit rather than race.

Deuteronomy 29:9-11

(9) You stand this day, all of you, before the LORD your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, (10) your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer—(11) to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
(a) Why do you think the Torah uses so many words to describe those present at this event? What do you gain from this comprehensive description?
(b) What does it mean to you to be part of a b’rit or covenant with God? What role does this play in your own Jewish identity?
(c) What do you think of Rabbi Buchdahl defining Jewish identity through the concepts of b’rit and family? What impact does this shift have for you and others in the community?

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