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RABBI TO RABBI

A SELECTION OF CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN
RABBI LISA J. GRUSHCOW AND RABBI N. DANIEL KOROBKIN
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Speaking to all on Rosh Hashanah

The High Holidays can be a difficult time for some, reopening previous pain, and though not everything can be forgiven, we must seek to release our anguish

RABBI N. DANIEL KOROBKIN, BETH AVRAHAM YOSEPH CONGREGATION, TORONTO
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September 7, 2017

Rabbi Grushcow: As we come towards Rosh Hashanah, as much as the events of the world concern us, it is clear to me that, above all, people are most concerned with their family relationships. Parents and children, siblings, spouses – all these relationships have their own challenges and their own blessings. For every family that comes together for an honour or shares a meal on the High Holidays, there is another that is distant. For every simchah – a new engagement or a milestone anniversary, a new baby, a new accomplishment – there are those carrying *tzuris* and feeling loss.

I imagine that you, like me, do a significant amount of counselling and pastoral care in the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah. But I also think about how we can address some of these varied family realities from the bimah on the Days of Awe. For example, when we invite new parents to bring up their babies, we recall the story of Hannah and recognize the pain of infertility, offering a prayer for all those who hope to conceive.

How do you approach these challenges?

Rabbi Korobkin: The High Holidays can have the unintended side-effect of reopening old relationship wounds. We know that these days are meant for repentance. Our tradition calls upon us to ask for forgiveness from both God and man. We must in turn be forgiving of others. But how does one whose spouse was unfaithful find it in their heart to forgive? How does one forgive a sibling or business partner who embezzled money from a shared family trust or business? How does a child forgive a parent for years of abuse?

Many in our communities carry the heavy burdens of past injuries and betrayals inflicted by loved ones. So, it's not surprising that clergy often increase counselling during the High Holiday season, for those who are truly seeking to forgive but whose pain runs so deep that they don't know how to even begin.

Years ago, Elie Wiesel wrote an article about forgiving God for the Holocaust. His theme was that he needed to forgive God not for God's sake, but for his own sake. The pain that we carry in our hearts needs to be released not for the sake of our oppressor, who may not deserve forgiveness, but for our own sake, so that we can start healing.

Rabbi Grushcow: There is a wonderful series of short films entitled “Jewish Food for Thought.” In one episode, a character is having trouble finding a way to forgive someone who has wronged him. His father suggests that the son is letting the person who hurt him live rent-free in his brain.

Living in a predominantly Christian society, I actually think we focus disproportionately on forgiveness. The Jewish model, which to me is much more powerful, focuses more on tshuvah (repentance). I can’t control someone who has wronged me – they may not even see the need to ask for forgiveness, or what they did might be unforgivable – but I can, and must, improve my own actions and use these days to try to become my best self.

Asking for forgiveness and being forgiven are essential parts of being human. We need to own up when we make mistakes and give others the second chances that we would want to be given. But sometimes, focusing on forgiveness can be a dead end. Ultimately, our own choices, and our own tshuvah, are what define us.

Rabbi Korobkin: You’re right, sometimes it’s not possible to forgive. In those situations, I recommend granting a “release” instead – letting go of the pain of holding onto that emotional debt incurred by the injuring party. We’re not forgiving them, but we’re at least releasing the hold they have on our lives. This kind of release is the greatest gift we can give ourselves.

And in the spirit of tshuvah and becoming closer to God and each other, let me express my gratitude for the opportunity to correspond with you in this forum and to become closer to a Jewish sister who cares about our people as I do. May God bless you and all our people with a year filled with goodness, consolation and blessing.

Can a house of worship divided stand?

Shulgoers are increasingly acting like consumers, demanding options in their minyanim. Will such behaviour weaken central institutions, as individuals neglect communal needs?

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October 12, 2017

Rabbi Korobkin: Our shul is a Cineplex of minyanim. We have no less than eight services operating on Shabbat mornings, with varieties for people who like a quick, nofrills service, a youth-led service, a hashkama minyan for early risers and, of course, the traditional davening in the main sanctuary. It seems like we're always adding new "flavours" to our offerings to cater to the variegated likes and dislikes of our congregants. These past High Holidays, for example, we offered a musical Slichot service for those who can get more inspiration through music.

People love choices, and it seems Jewish consumers want the same out of their houses of worship. Are you seeing the same kind of demand for variety and multiple "flavours" in your congregation? How are you dealing with it?

Rabbi Grushcow: I often think of the image of Abraham and Sarah's tent, which was open on all four sides, so people could enter easily, whichever direction they came from. It's a good model for open and pluralistic communities, recognizing that everyone enters with different interests, experiences and needs.

That being said, a core feature of community is being together across differences. So, for example, while we have programs for seniors, teens, members in their 20s and 30s, young families, empty nesters and so on, we also make sure to have plenty of intergenerational opportunities for people to study, pray and do mitzvot together. It's a vital balancing act.

What I find challenging is the membership dues model, where the clash between individual and communal needs is often played out. People sometimes resent paying their dues – or pay less than they are able – because, when the time comes to write the cheque, their focus is on individual needs ("What do I get out of this?") rather than communal needs ("How can I help ensure the synagogue is here for everyone?").

I wish I knew the solution to this tension. I don't think, however, that it can be solved simply by offering more variety. We face the challenge of responding to consumerism while teaching different values.

Rabbi Korobkin: As sociologist Peter Berger observed, with the pluralization of religious preferences – what we call "shteiblization" in our circles – comes a weakening of the centralized religious institutions. And you're right: when one views their shul like any other service provider,

this can be accompanied by diminished loyalty and a “pay-per-view” attitude, where the consumer wishes to pay for only those services they’re consuming at the moment.

New models are constantly being discussed for membership dues for that very reason. Some are suggesting shuls should dispense with membership altogether and rely exclusively on philanthropic gifts (sort of like “passing the plate,” but without the plate). I don’t know the solution, but we certainly need to be having these conversations.

Fortunately, our shul is still mostly comprised of people who feel a great sense of dedication and loyalty. Our rate of volunteerism is higher than in any other community I’ve ever lived. While this fills me with hope and optimism, I still sometimes feel that we are experiencing tectonic shifts in how our Jewish communities function, and we need to be prepared.

Rabbi Grushcow: I too am very moved by the generosity we see in our community. It far outweighs the feeling of being disheartened by those who devalue what we do. At the end of the day, people give of themselves to the places that matter to them and to causes that speak to their hearts. I think the most important challenge is to build communities of meaning, which people actively want to sustain.

In my Yom Kippur morning sermon, I grappled with a line from Jonathan Safran Foer’s latest novel, *Here I Am*. In it, the main character, who is ambivalent about his Jewish identity, reflects: “You only get to keep what you refuse to let go of.” Active affiliation, philanthropy and participation are all ways of holding on tight to our Judaism.

May 5778 be a year in which we recommit to the relationships, values and communities which matter most in our lives.

Breaking the interfaith ice

Starting conversations with members of other religious communities, especially Muslims, can help clear the existing air of mistrust in order to pursue mutual interests.

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November 16, 2017

Rabbi Grushcow: When my predecessor, Rabbi Harry Joshua Stern, started interfaith dialogue in Montreal, it was a radical move. At the time, Christians and Jews simply did not speak to each other about religion. The conversations Rabbi Stern helped to foster are of vital importance, especially as Jews continue to be challenged by the BDS movement and other resurgences of anti-Semitism. It is essential to have allies. But in addition to having allies, it's important to be allies.

In his book *How to Be a Muslim*, author Haroon Moghul describes gathering with other Muslims in their prayer space at New York University's Islamic Center on 9/11. He was surprised to find an Orthodox Jew there, wearing a kippah. Asked why he was there on that day of all days, the man explained, "I figured if someone needed to get home, and wanted someone to walk her, I could come along. A hijab might provoke rage right now. Alongside a Jewish man, perhaps less so."

Rabbi Korobkin: It's vitally important to identify allies and friends in the Muslim community. This past May, we hosted Imam Abdullah Antepli of Duke University, who together with author Yossi Klein HaLevi is co-director of a new program at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem called the Muslim Leadership Initiative. Its sole aim is to improve Muslim-Jewish relations and to create an entrée for Islamic leaders to understand and better appreciate the Zionist narrative. It was a fascinating evening, attended not only by Jews in our community, but also by local Muslim leaders. We're continuing the ongoing dialogue, very gently and discreetly.

We also know that many Jews in our community mistrust all Muslims, and that there are many Muslims who mistrust all Jews. That's unfortunate, and leaders in both communities need to work hard together on creating slow and subtle changes to that climate. There is so much that we can accomplish if we try and appreciate each other first as human beings, all members of the same local community, with families and loved ones, with homes and businesses, who simply wish to coexist peacefully.

Rabbi Grushcow: I have actually started seeing a lot of partnerships on the ground: a discussion group comprised of Christian, Muslim and Jewish women; a monthly effort in which members of all three religions cook together and then distribute food in downtown Montreal. I find these projects very heartening, especially in Quebec, as we are once again being drawn into debate about face coverings, religious observance and secular society.

As a rabbi in a progressive congregation, I'm particularly interested in encountering Muslims who are working toward change within their own communities, as well as building bridges between religions. I'm learning more about pluralism within Islam, women's leadership, gay Muslims and so on. I am especially interested in Islamic interpretive tools and similarities between rabbinic midrash and Muslim hadith.

For you, in a more traditional context, I'm curious: Islam is sometimes attacked for perceived inequality between men and women. In your community, where men and women have separate roles, do you find areas of connection within your traditionalism? What have you learned from these encounters?

Rabbi Korobkin: The similarities between Orthodox Judaism and traditional Islam are often remarkable. But beyond that, an important reason why Orthodox Jews make natural dialogue partners with Muslims is because, over the last couple of centuries, we have manoeuvred the difficult task of integrating with the western world – after the walls of the ghetto came down – while still retaining our core religious practices and identities. Many Muslims view Orthodox Judaism in the West as a model for how Islam can (and ultimately must) adapt and integrate into a completely different culture and social milieu.

We have much to share with each other, and the more they see us as willing partners in community-building, the more we will find moderate Muslims who are willing to speak up in support of our mutual interests. There will always be extremists and haters, and so we still need to be cautious. But by focusing on the positive bridge-building, I believe both our communities will benefit immensely.

Liberal Judaism and Israel

The Reform movement lauded U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, but voiced concern over the move's timing. How connected are the non-Orthodox to the Jewish state?

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December 21, 2017

Rabbi Korobkin: When I first heard that U.S. President Donald Trump had recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, our shul was on a mission in Poland. We had just seen the remains of the death camp in Belzec, where a half-million Jews were murdered in 10 months, and were on our way to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where we were privileged to witness a closing ceremony for dozens of IDF officers who were visiting the camps. For our delegation, the news of Jerusalem's formal recognition could not have come at a better time. It was the soothing balm to a most painful and graphic revisiting of the Shoah.

I am not surprised that many world leaders condemned Trump's action, nor am I surprised that his announcement has been embraced as historic by Jewish organizations worldwide. However, I am surprised that the leader of Reform Judaism publicly disagreed with the president's decision. How are you dealing with this in your congregation?

Rabbi Grushcow: In the statement he issued after the announcement, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said: "President Trump has affirmed an age-old dream of the Jewish People and of all who care about Israel. Jerusalem is, in fact, the capital of Israel. That is how it should and must be. The president correctly noted that a sovereign state is entitled to name its own capital. The Reform movement has also long held that the U.S. Embassy should be moved to Jerusalem."

This statement was accompanied by a concern about the timing of the announcement – one that many Jews share, given that the peace process has been stalled for a long time and there is an ongoing risk of violence. Now, that's not to say nothing should be done out of fear of others' responses. But it is vital to recognize that a complex situation calls for careful action.

Jerusalem is our capital, whether the world recognizes it or not. I don't need President Trump to tell me that. I do, however, need the American government to help us move forward toward peace.

Rabbi Korobkin: But the fact still remains that many Jews further to the left have strongly condemned Trump's action. And it's not just Trump and Jerusalem. Birthright Israel, for example, openly laments that non-Orthodox groups are falling short of filling quotas for sending youth to Israel. Despite all the bravado and claims to the contrary, it's clear that the connection to Israel and Zionism has eroded drastically on the left.

I'm not saying this to call you or your movement out. I'm asking what we can do to stem the increasing tide of apathy and antipathy among our youth toward Israel. Orthodoxy's solution is to create the religious bond. If that's not a message that resonates on the left, what will keep our youth connected to Israel?

Rabbi Grushcow: I respectfully disagree with the notion that Jews on the progressive end of the spectrum have no religious ties to Israel. It's notable that the voice of the liberal movements has been loud specifically on religious issues. We want the authority of our rabbis to be recognized, to have the ability to pray with the Torah at the Kotel and to enable all Jews to express their authentic religious identities in our Jewish homeland.

But here's the thing: we are not going to help Jews connect to Israel if we hold them to a party line on religious – or political – belief. There's already too much alienation, and alienation leads to indifference. If anything, we need to redouble our efforts to let Jews from across the political and religious spectrum engage with Israel in all its complexity.

That's why I've been excited to see the emergence of new efforts, like Honeymoon Israel, specifically designed to help Jews who may not have had the chance otherwise connect to Israel. Interfaith couples, same sex couples, unaffiliated couples – all are being encouraged to make their own memories in Israel. I remain convinced that when we help people see Israel with their own eyes, something very special happens. But with Israel, as with Judaism, people need to be able to bring their whole selves.

Enriching the soul through literature

Even rabbis need to get lost in a good novel once in a while.

RABBI N. DANIEL KOROBKIN, BETH AVRAHAM YOSEPH CONGREGATION, TORONTO

RABBI LISA GRUSHCOW, TEMPLE EMANU-EL-BETH SHOLOM, MONTREAL

February 1, 2018

Rabbi Grushcow: I was saddened to hear about the death of Jewish-Canadian novelist Nancy Richler recently. Of the books she wrote, I was especially moved by *The Imposter Bride* and *Your Mouth is Lovely*, both of which reflect elements of the Jewish experience. More and more, I find literature to be a source of nourishment, and I feel especially fortunate to be in Montreal, with its strong Jewish literary life.

This month, I've been writing a lot, as I was asked to do a commentary on the Book of Numbers for the Union for Reform Judaism. In between writing, I've been reading books that have little or nothing to do with Judaism, for a change, including *The Heart Specialist* by Claire Holden Rothman, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* by Helen Simonson and *The Illegal* by Lawrence Hill.

Over the years, books have shaped me, and my faith, in profound ways. I think of *In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje, *Lying Awake* by Mark Salzman, *Leo the African* by Amin Maalouf, *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr and many more.

What books have been formative to you? What are you reading now?

Rabbi Korobkin: All too often, we rabbis get so immersed in our pulpits, that it becomes hard to find the time to read good literature, other than the Torah studies that we need to read, in order to teach and preach. But you're right: good literature expands our minds and our souls, even when the content is not directly related to Judaism.

Because of time constraints, I sometimes save books on my "to-read list" for long plane trips and summer vacations. Some of my favourite authors, such as Jonathan Haidt and the late Peter Berger, reflect on social and psychological behaviour. I also enjoy reading personal spiritual journeys, like *If All the Seas Were Ink*, Ilana Kurshan's recent memoir about studying the entire Talmud using the Daf Yomi system. James Kugel's *The Great Shift*, which is about how modern neuroscience can help us better understand how ancient man read the Bible, is another fantastic read.

Finally, two recent fictitious books about the Holocaust that were written by people close to me – my mother, Frieda Korobkin, and my congregant, Sharon Green – both brought me to tears.

Rabbi Grushcow: I, too, recently read Ilana Kurshan's book. At one point, she gives a perspective on the conversation you and I are having, recounting a time when she decided to keep reading her book, instead of pausing for evening prayers. She writes: "God, for me, was more likely to be found in the pages of *Don Quixote*, where the intricate narrative craft reminds me that the world is about so much more than what we sense at any given moment."

For you and I, the universalism of literature flows back into our teaching of Torah. One of the most inspiring reflections on faith I have ever read comes from Mark Salzman's portrayal of the spiritual struggles of a cloistered nun in *Lying Awake*. But good literature also reminds me how, as Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman teaches, ritual itself is an art form.

Resonant music, well-crafted sermons, a beautifully set Shabbat table – all these things are important to a meaningful Jewish life. I want to find more ways for people to experience that kind of beauty and joy, perspective and inspiration.

Rabbi Korobkin: The institutional aspects of communal Judaism are often constraining. For so many Jews today, the synagogue can be the place that they find spiritually stifling. That's why rabbis must always explore new informal and innovative venues for finding God. Perhaps you, as a Reform rabbi, have more liberty to experiment than I, as an Orthodox rabbi. But we both agree that many, if not most, of our congregants are searching for something outside the shul that can help them capture communion with the Divine.

Spiritual inspiration is extremely personal and must be catered to the individual. For those who find Torah study inspiring, it may entail setting up a *havruta*, or listening to a charismatic speaker. For others, perhaps it's a sunrise service on a mountaintop, or a concert of Hasidic music and dancing. Like you, I'm always trying to find solutions. Let me know when you find the magic cure.

All the single ladies, all the single men

Are we doing enough to help those within the Jewish community who are looking for love find one another in today's increasingly complex, technologically advanced world?

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March 8, 2018

Rabbi Korobkin: Are Jewish communities and individuals doing enough to match singles together? Our shul just hosted a Shabbaton for Jewish singles and it drew a huge crowd – that tells me that there aren't enough venues for the single members of our community to meet.

In very Orthodox communities, there's a formal system called the shidduch. It involves resumes and shadchen who individually connect two singles, matching both the couple and the families together. There's definitely wisdom in the system, but it has its faults, too. In more modern circles, even though the formal shidduch system isn't utilized, there's still an informal process where thoughtful and caring individuals "have a friend who has a friend," and more casual introductions are made.

But what about all those who fall between the cracks? Part of me says we're not doing enough to create opportunities for Jewish singles to meet each other. The other part of me says that in today's world of social media, many singles lack the social skills or drive to get out there and meet people. Am I being unfair?

Rabbi Grushcow: I've read a number of articles lately that describe loneliness as a disease. There is plenty of medical evidence for the basic insight we get in Genesis: *lo tov l'adam lihoiyot levado* – "it's not good for humans to be alone." At the same time, making a good match can be incredibly difficult.

So what are we to do? Provide opportunities for people to meet? Absolutely. But we need to be careful: if synagogues put too much emphasis on matchmaking, single people can end up feeling like failures if they don't find their match. Not to mention LGBTQ Jews, who rarely find synagogue programming to help them find their *basherts*, or people who might not be interested in finding a significant other, but are looking to make other types of connections within the community.

Rabbi Korobkin: There are multiple internal drives that motivate people to get married. There's the instinct that we belong with another; there's the loneliness factor; and, for some, there's the desire to procreate. But my point is that in today's high-tech world, some people are choosing not to marry because they use social media, casual hookups and career pursuits as a substitute for entering into meaningful relationships. A recent U.S. study showed that barely half of the adults in the country are married, which is a dramatic drop from 1967, when it was 70 per cent.

I'm deeply empathetic to those who haven't found love yet. But what's so disconcerting is that many people today don't possess the same deep yearning for marriage as those of earlier generations. I note that many young adults are very particular about what they want in a mate and are willing to sacrifice marriage if they don't find that perfect prince or princess charming. I fear that there are many shidduchs waiting to be made under our very noses, but that some people don't yet recognize the *bashert* that is right in front of them.

Rabbi Grushcow: I do think that, what the Jewish- French philosopher Emanuel Levinas called "the temptation of temptation," is a problem. As long as we hold onto the idea of endless choice as the ultimate value, we never commit to anything enough to really know what we are choosing. This is true of religion, as much as it is of relationships.

I have the privilege of standing under the huppah with many couples, young and old, who have met online. It may have become commonplace, but that doesn't mean it's easy. Meeting online involves the same risks and vulnerabilities, if not more, that earlier generations faced when meeting people. I admire those who put themselves out there and I think one of the best things we can do as rabbis is build communities where a newly engaged couple can see another couple called to the bimah to celebrate 50 years of marriage, and see that it's not always easy, but it's worthwhile. Above all, I want to build a place where people of all ages and stages of life, and with all different family configurations, can support and inspire each other in the search for a meaningful life.

The Shoah and valuing human life

Do we need to invoke the Holocaust while teaching about the importance of each individual, or does its scale warrant reserving its educational value for larger lessons?

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April 12, 2018

Rabbi Grushcow: Recently, I typed “Yom Hashoah” on my cellphone and the autocorrect function changed “Hashoah” to “hashtag.” One of the many lessons of the Holocaust is that human beings cannot be reduced to hashtags, or anything that renders us as generic. Rather, our tradition insists, each and every human being is made in the image of God, filled with unique potential and value.

Dehumanization does not always come from hate. It also comes from invisibility, exclusion and neglect. I think here not only of victims of the Holocaust, but of survivors who live lives of poverty and isolation. In our synagogues, we have the opportunity – and the obligation – to insist that everyone matters, and to create a space in which people can find a home.

We know that people can feel alienated even – and sometimes especially – in Jewish life. And while I am not trying to make an equation between the horrors of the Holocaust and the human experience of loneliness, I do wonder how we can best walk the walk of valuing every individual we encounter and seeing each life as holy.

Rabbi Korobkin: You’re certainly correct that the Nazis first had to dehumanize Jews in order to justify their “liquidation.” And you’re also correct that we run the risk of further dehumanization any time we label someone as insignificant, invisible or “the other.” But – and perhaps this is because I’m the child of a survivor – I am uncomfortable citing the Shoah as the cautionary tale for this kind of lesson. In my mind, it diminishes the uniqueness and sheer magnitude of what it means for the world and for those who lived through it or died in it.

I’d prefer to preserve the “sanctity” of the Shoah as a cautionary tale of the immorality and depravity that mankind is capable of, and a reminder that “never again” means that we will never tolerate genocide against anyone, anywhere in the world. We don’t need the Holocaust to teach us about the importance of valuing every individual. We need only learn from the Torah’s repeated admonition: “Love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt.”

Rabbi Grushcow: One survivor who has inspired me is Viktor Frankl. In his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he wrote: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” I also continue to be inspired by the ongoing work of the Montreal Holocaust Museum, a central institution of our community here. Its mission, in addition to educating people about the

Holocaust, includes "sensitizing the public to the universal perils of anti-Semitism, racism, hate and indifference" and promoting "respect for diversity and the sanctity of human life."

As humans, we are meaning-making creatures. Do we need to be wary of overusing the Holocaust, and thereby cheapening it? Absolutely. But one way or another, we need to learn to treat one another as made in the image of God.

Rabbi Korobkin: We are all too familiar with people who accuse those with whom they disagree of being Nazis, or who misapply some Holocaust analogy, which makes us cringe. But I also believe that we can learn so much from those survivors who have led happy and productive lives despite living through hell.

I remember the passing, in 2014, of the oldest Holocaust survivor to date, Alice Sommer, at the age of 110. Her life was always filled with love and music. She never looked back with malice toward her captors, and instead chose to remember how playing the piano was the key to her survival in the camps. She claimed that her positive outlook was the key to her longevity. Similarly, the great Rebbe of Klausenberg, Y.Y. Halberstam, lost his wife and 10 children in Auschwitz, and yet he rose from the ashes, started a new family and built the Laniado Hospital in Netanya, Israel, which has brought life to hundreds of thousands.

These heroes' positivity and optimism allowed them to rise above the evil of their surroundings and find goodness and redemption. Surely, this is a timely message for all people, one that can inspire us to better deal with the comparatively small challenges of everyday life.

How to elevate the festival of Torah

In terms of popularity, Shavuot is a distant also-ran among a multitude of Jewish holidays. But why isn't this celebration of Judaism's guiding light more widely observed?

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May 17, 2018

Rabbi Korobkin: Jews all over the world celebrate Passover together with family and friends. It's the most celebrated holiday on the calendar, and for good reason. As the saying goes, "They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat!" By contrast, Shavuot, which commemorates the most important historical event for the Jewish people and, indeed, the world – the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai – is one of our least celebrated holidays.

Shavuot marks the date when the Jews first heard that they were expected to uphold a full set of commandments and ideals from God. The Torah revolutionized not only one nation, its influence upon all of civilization for the past 3,000 years has indelibly changed our world for the better. But most Jews don't even know about Shavuot, and those who do, more often than not associate it with blintzes and cheesecake instead of Torah study.

Why do you think that is? What can we do to elevate the status of Shavuot?

Rabbi Grushcow: I love Shavuot. I have wonderful childhood memories of drifting off to sleep on one of the synagogue benches as my parents stayed up late for Tikun leil Shavuot (an all-night study session). In Reform congregations, Shavuot historically has been given added prominence by the celebration of confirmation, when our young adults who have continued their studies past bar/bat mitzvah affirm their Jewish connection and read the Ten Commandments from the Torah.

I agree that the core of the holiday is Torah. As I write this, I am deeply saddened by the sudden death of one of my greatest teachers, Rabbi Aaron Panken. Rabbi Panken was the president of the Reform movement's seminary, Hebrew Union College, and was also an extraordinary teacher of Torah, broadly defined, especially rabbinic Judaism. One of the many things I learned from him was an abiding passion for teaching. As our sages said, "*Hafoch ba v'hafoch ba, ki kula ba*" (Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it).

Our texts are insightful and profound, sometimes poignant and often funny. So how can we elevate the status of Shavuot? By sharing our own excitement about Torah, and giving as many avenues as possible for our congregants to experience the joy of Jewish study.

Rabbi Korobkin: Maybe the fact that there's no big family meal associated with Shavuot has to do with the intellectual and ethereal nature of the Torah. When it comes to Passover, we

celebrate our liberation from slavery. Our enslavement was physical confinement, and so we celebrate our physical freedom with physical aids, such as a big seder.

But freed slaves who have no guiding ideology or *raison d'être* are still slaves, just to a different master. In order to truly be free, one needs to be "liberated to" a meaningful purpose, instead of just being "liberated from" something. I worry that in today's society our "liberation from" has never been greater, but our "liberation to" has never been smaller. This aimlessness manifests in many strange ways – just look at the recent tragic van attack in Toronto by a person who had reportedly lost his way to some strange misogynist "incel" (involuntary celibate) rebellion.

Without a beacon of ideological wisdom, there's no telling where a person will end up. Perhaps that's reason enough to appreciate and highlight Shavuot.

Rabbi Grushcow: While Shavuot doesn't feature a big family meal, the focus on Torah does lead us to a very special kind of gathering: *havrutah*. We are not meant to study Torah or other Jewish texts by ourselves, but in pairs. *Havrutah* study is rooted in the word *haver*, which means friend or colleague. The premise is that each study partner has something to teach and something to learn, and that, together, each will gain more insights than either person would achieve alone.

As much as I love being alone with a stack of books, or teaching in front of a class, I love *havrutah* study best of all. I have had the privilege of superb study partners of all different denominations and backgrounds and, at the synagogue, I often encourage people to turn to each other with a question or a piece of text. We see the world differently when we stretch to understand another person's perspective – and this approach engenders a powerful energy and excitement.

Missed synagogue connections

You were planning your child's bar/bat mitzvah. Perhaps I caught your eye for a moment. But you decided to go down a different path. What more can I do to form a relationship?

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RABBI LISA GRUSHCOW, TEMPLE EMANU-EL-BETH SHOLOM, MONTREAL

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Rabbi Grushcow: I was struck by a recent *CJN* cover story about the trend of bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies taking place outside the synagogue. Bar mitzvahs, as you know, are a relatively recent phenomenon in Jewish history – bat mitzvahs even more so – and yet they resonate as markers of Jewish identity. I am simultaneously moved by the fact that so many Jews still want to make it part of their lives and the lives of their children, and challenged by the fact that the synagogue is not seen by everyone as the obvious home for it.

I'm proud of what our b'nai mitzvah and their families accomplish and learn. For many, I think, it's a time of deep connection to the synagogue and the Jewish community. So how do we convey that message?

Rabbi Korobkin: I recently cited that article while a bar mitzvah boy was standing at my side in our synagogue. I dispelled some of the misconceptions – no, a shul bar mitzvah is not "10 times the price," and is indeed often less expensive than other venues – but also validated the fact that, for some families, a synagogue is not always inviting. Then I turned to the bar mitzvah boy and said, "Fortunately, your family flourishes in the synagogue. You come with your parents to shul every Shabbat, you've joined our youth activities and you daven at your father's side. For you, synagogue life is an extension of your Jewish educational life, and that's why it feels so much like home to have your bar mitzvah here."

We all know the old joke about the rabbi who had mice in his synagogue: he solved the problem by giving each mouse a bar mitzvah – after that, he never saw them again! We need to find more compelling reasons for certain families to become members than just lifecycle events. Making personal connections between our clergy and members, whether in the form of a *chavruta* (small Torah study group) or just being there during a rough time, are key to ensuring families and individuals feel connected to shul.

Rabbi Grushcow: But how do we make the case to those who see no reason to connect with a synagogue in the first place?

I often speak about how being part of a community allows us to do things together that we can't do alone. For example, when we collectively sponsored two Syrian refugee families, we made a real difference, above and beyond what we as individuals could do.

With b'nai mitzvah in particular, I am always blown away by the impact of the young adult on the bimah. Their parents see them with new eyes, as the young adults they are becoming. And the bar/bat mitzvah sees that people they don't even know care about them, are invested in them and are willing to learn from them. (Not to mention all the learning they do leading up to the service, which helps the whole family explore their Jewish identity in an experiential way.)

When my own daughter became bat mitzvah in our congregation last year, I was relieved to discover that what I've been telling families all these years is, in fact, true: it is a remarkable rite of passage.

Rabbi Korobkin: Perhaps the challenge in identifying the correct formula is best expressed by the prophet Malachi describing what Elijah will herald at the final redemption: "He shall restore the heart of the parents to the children, and the heart of the children to their parents."

Sometimes the pull to the synagogue comes from the parents, who see their children being educated in the finest of schools yet lacking in basic moral values and sense of purpose. Other times, the children see their parents pursuing vacuous goals that don't speak to them, and they end up on a spiritual quest, dragging their parents along.

It's clear that we can no longer rely on adults alone to recognize the value of Jewish communal participation. Multiple prongs – adult education, social justice, youth activities – all play a role in helping individuals identify the value of belonging to the *kehillah* (community).

Healing the world, or hurting it?

Are Jewish social justice warriors who claim a monopoly on tikun olam doing more harm than good, or are they truly fighting to make the world a better place for all?

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Rabbi Korobkin: In a new book, *To Heal the World? How the Jewish Left Corrupts Judaism and Endangers Israel*, author Jonathan Neumann argues that tikun olam, the Jewish value of social justice, has evolved into a political ideology that includes economic justice and the labour movement, social issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage and transgenderism, as well as political platforms on immigration, the environment, renewable energy and education reform.

Tikun olam, so the argument goes, has become intertwined with liberal political ideology. Even criticism of Israel and support of the Palestinian narrative has been interpreted by some to be part of the mandate of tikun olam. Others have argued that for one to truly embrace tikun olam, it's impossible to be a political conservative.

Neumann argues that this has been quite harmful to North American Jewry because it provides the illusion that one can be a good Jew by focusing on a particular political platform, instead of personal observance of mitzvot.

Rabbi Grushcow: In his thoughtful critique of the book, Rabbi Shaul Magid argues that Neumann does not define, or delve into, the "Judaism" that he accuses liberals of distorting. Judaism has always been an interpretive religion. We understand Torah through the lens of our own times; even the Talmud emphasizes that we should only judge based on what our own eyes see.

Should tikun olam be the private possession of one political camp? Of course not. Does it replace other aspects of Jewish life? I have never heard anyone argue it should, and some leaders in the Jewish social justice world also live observant Jewish lives. So many Jews have reconnected with their Judaism through the call for social justice – what possible benefit is there to deriding them?

Rabbi Korobkin: What I believe Neumann is getting at is that for too many, tikun olam serves as a replacement for personal Jewish observance. As Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Reform Religious Action Center, stated, tikun olam serves "as the most common organizing principle of Jewish identity." So contrary to your suggestion, it does appear that tikun olam is replacing other aspects of Jewish life.

Moreover, it seems that the more someone claims they are driven by tikun olam, the weaker their support for Israel becomes. Tikun olam is used today to espouse universal ideals, such as equality and embracing all of humankind. Thus, Palestinians are the same as Israelis and there is complete moral equivalence. Even more radically, the argument used by many who espouse

tikun olam is that we should move away from Jewish tribalism and embrace the universal love of all mankind.

Judaism without a unique set of rules and a national identity ceases to be Judaism.

Rabbi Grushcow: Social justice has been part of Judaism since God created human beings in the Divine image. It stayed with us throughout the Torah, with the great story of the Jewish people's journey from slavery to freedom. And it is repeated again and again in the command to care for the stranger. From my vantage point here in Israel, the thousands of gay families and allies rallying for surrogacy rights in Tel Aviv are just as Jewish as the thousands of people gathered at the Kotel on Tisha b'Av.

The call for justice and perfecting the world is an essential part of who we are – as much as Shabbat and other mitzvot. Every Jew will find their way through the path that speaks to them. For some, it will be the rhythm of traditional Jewish life. For others, it will be connecting to the Jewish tradition of speaking up for freedom. For many, it will be a combination of both.

To tell Jews that to be really Jewish means being tribal, and only caring about one's own, is a double betrayal. It betrays the lives that many Jews are living with integrity, and it betrays Judaism itself, which has always cared about both particularism and universalism. After all, as Hillel said: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?