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RABBI TO RABBI

A SELECTION OF CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN
RABBI LISA J. GRUSHCOW AND RABBI N. DANIEL KOROBKIN
IN THE CANADIAN JEWISH NEWS.

Reaching Jews who are opting out

By **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**
October 27, 2016

Judaism's greatest insights are connected to the idea of community, and clergy need help making them relevant to a new generation of thinkers and doubters

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

Rabbi Grushcow: I was disturbed recently by a much-circulated Forward article in which the author, Jay Michaelson, argued that Jews shouldn't go to synagogue this past Rosh Hashanah. Apparently there were even copies being distributed outside some synagogues here in Montreal.

I'm all for opening the conversation about how we can make these days more meaningful, but I don't think it makes anything better to tell people to stay home. As many who responded to Michaelson's article pointed out, it's not exactly counter-cultural to encourage people to be individualistic instead of connecting to a community. Religion in general, and Judaism in particular, can be a force that reminds us we are not alone in the world, that we are responsible to one another and are stronger together.

There is a power to hearing the shofar in a packed sanctuary that can never be replicated at home.

But I do think about the people who are opting out. What's keeping them from coming in? What more can we do to help Jews connect to the message and the meaning of these days, and the experience of coming together?

Rabbi Korobkin: As cynical as the Forward article was, I think Michaelson was on to something when stating that those who come to shul only during the High Holidays aren't getting a real taste of a communal spiritual experience. The services during the holidays, he argued, are overly scripted, lack spontaneity and are essentially a performance for the consumer. There's merit to his suggestion that people try to find other times during the year when they'll find a more authentic spiritual experience. So perhaps one thing we can all work on is to create more venues outside the High Holidays for our congregants to come together for services that are inspirational, and above all, participatory.

Many shuls are regularly trying new ways to invigorate and revitalize the services. Even Orthodox shuls like ours are exploring new niggunim (melodies) and formats to spruce things up. This year, our shul hosted a Carlebach-style Slichot service with musical instruments.

It was a big hit.

At the same time, one of the attractions of an Orthodox synagogue is the familiarity of the services and the adherence to a tradition that goes back multiple generations. For us, finding a balance between the old and the new is always an imperative.

Rabbi Grushcow: We all want to find contemporary ways to connect with Judaism's timeless truths. I had been looking forward to our Sukkot celebration, Pizza in the Hut. Like many others, we also reach beyond the synagogue walls, hosting parenting groups in coffee shops and study groups in people's homes.

But while creative programming may get people in the door, it won't necessarily make them stay. As much as we need to be attuned to people's individual needs, Judaism's greatest insights are connected to the idea of community, whether it is the minyan we need to support us as we mourn, or the tikkun olam efforts that are magnified when we act together.

But the lesson holds for us, too. We rabbis can't do this alone, as hard as we work this time of year. We need our lay leaders as partners, and we need to learn from our congregants – and those who do not join. There will always be someone to tell us we led a moving service or gave a great sermon (God willing!). But I hope we also hear from people who can tell us what we are missing.

Rabbi Korobkin: You and I, and clergy around the world, will continue our collective angst about filling the pews of our respective houses of prayer. But ultimately there's a much bigger struggle at hand: making Judaism relevant to a new generation of thinkers and doubters.

The cynicism of the article you quoted is a contagion that has spread through cyberspace and permeates the minds of an entire generation. One of my prayers for the new year is that we be able to find both God and ourselves amid a swirling storm of shrill cacophony that is further shrouding our collective sense of purpose and meaning, including our relationship with God.

Let's pray together that not only are the voices of our congregants heard in our synagogues, but that God's loving voice is heard more clearly throughout the world.

Lessons from a fractious U.S. vote

By **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**
November 24, 2016

Is it time for spiritual leaders to express optimism and encourage tolerance and civility? Or is it time for those concerned about pluralism and equality to act on those values?

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

Rabbi Korobkin: I can't recall a more acrimonious campaign than the recently concluded U.S. election. People are rioting on the streets and spewing vitriol online about the results. Friendships have been destroyed, and people don't feel safe talking politics anymore.

Americans seem to be placing political and social ideologies above the basic respect and courtesy owed to one's fellow human being. If I don't agree with your politics, I'm not just mistaken – I'm either an idiot, an immoral sellout, a racist or a misogynist. What happened to civil and respectful discourse? What happened to engaging with someone who holds different ideas and views in the hope that we might learn from each other?

Do the events in America, not to mention the Brexit vote, reflect upon a larger social ill, that of a cavalier disdain for, and a readiness to discard, the "other"?

Rabbi Grushcow: I think that people take the step of "discarding the other" when they themselves feel discarded. I am hearing a deep sense of vulnerability from friends in the United States who were the targets of vitriol during the campaign and now are fearful about what the next four years will bring. At the same time, we cannot ignore the economic malaise that led so many to take a chance on change.

So what can a rabbi learn? One of the greatest challenges is knowing when to make peace and when to stand one's ground. This has not been a normal election season, and I fear it will not be a normal aftermath. Those who have been around for more political cycles than I have assure me that we often think the world is ending, and it hasn't yet.

Ironically, in both Brexit and the American election, there has been an emphasis on walls and borders. But I feel like our world is more permeable and interconnected than ever. I hope we can find ways to recover the good in those connections.

Rabbi Korobkin: Your point is well taken that this malicious behaviour has taken place on both sides. Backers of Donald Trump have attacked and completely dismissed many on the left, while Hillary Clinton's supporters have done the same to those on the right. No one's hands are clean.

What surprises me about your response, though, is that this should in any way justify or legitimate the behaviours that we are seeing in the aftermath of the election. Just because

someone is feeling scared or vulnerable doesn't give them license to take to the streets, vandalize, and spew the same hatred to which they feel subjected.

Instead of sitting shivah in our shuls, as some rabbis have done, I think it's time for spiritual leaders to express optimism and hope for the future. Instead of rejecting the elections, we should encourage our congregants to be positively involved in moving our world in a positive direction of tolerance and civility. While there are serious and legitimate concerns about our elected leaders, in the end, God runs the world, not the president of the United States.

Rabbi Grushcow: You may be misreading me a little. I am indeed concerned for all those who are feeling left out in American society and all around the world. But I reject the equivalencies drawn between the Trump and Clinton campaigns and their followers. Yes, both were heated and personal, but only the Trump campaign stereotyped and targeted entire groups of people based on gender, nationality, race and religion.

The election is over. The results cannot be rejected.

But we can respond. One way I am acting is through tzedakah – making donations to U.S. organizations such as Planned Parenthood, the Religious Action Centre, Define American and the American Civil Liberties Union.

My default mode is optimism, but I also think we need to take world events seriously. In many societies over many years, Jews have had their suitcases packed and felt safer with more than one passport. I don't know if that's necessary now, but I'm less certain than I was last month.

I think we see societies turning inward in a frightening way, and those of us who care about pluralism and equality are duty-bound to act. In the words of Reform Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman, "Pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depended on you."

The many lessons of Chanukah

By **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**
December 21, 2016

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

Rabbi Grushcow: A few years ago, Chanukah coincided with American Thanksgiving. This year, it begins on Christmas Eve. It's said that Jewish holidays are always early or late, but never on time!

Despite these overlaps, Chanukah is based on a story of Jewish uniqueness, and the willingness to stand up for one's identity at any cost. I'm fascinated by the history of the holiday, and how it shifted from its original focus on political resistance to the theme of spiritual endurance.

I love how this story took on new life with the founding of the State of Israel, when our people were searching for heroes. And I love the ancient dispute of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai about whether we should start with eight lights on the first night and light one less candle every subsequent night (Shammai) or start with one and go up (Hillel). The latter approach is the one we use, because we always want to increase holiness and hope.

What are some of your favourite Chanukah teachings and traditions?

Rabbi Korobkin: My favourite Chanukah teaching is based on the fact that we invariably read the Torah portions about Joseph's sale into slavery during this holiday. While at first glance, there seems to be no connection between the two stories, which are separated by at least 1,500 years, I always find uncanny parallels.

The Joseph story teaches us that different approaches exist within Judaism. Joseph's story, as he rose to become viceroy of a foreign kingdom, shows that, at times, Jews have a role to play within secular society. Jews must often adapt to our parent (in Joseph's case, Egyptian) culture, speak the same language and wear the same clothes. The message is that our Judaism will sometimes assume a more contemporary garb with which he can sanctify God among the nations.

But at other times – especially when there is an active effort by the parent culture to suppress or fundamentally alter Judaism – Jews must segregate ourselves and resist the foreign gods around us. This was the divide between Joseph and his brothers. And in this sense, the Hasmoneans played the role of Joseph's brothers many centuries later when they fought against the Greeks.

Today, both approaches are embraced by different factions within our people, to varying degrees. There will always be room at the Jewish family table for both the Josephs and the brothers.

Rabbi Grushcow: I like your image of how there is always room at the table. As I write this, I'm on a bus back from Ottawa, where I was at a chanukiyah lighting (albeit a little early) with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, along with the leaders of Canada's other political parties, numerous politicians, Jewish communal leaders and rabbis of all different denominations. We are fortunate to live in a time when the broader culture embraces us and shares in our celebrations. I'm proud to live in a country that embraces diversity as a strength.

I agree that there are different approaches to Jewish identity and practice, based on different contexts. At the same time, I agree with my teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, who says that we are always simultaneously "defining in" and "defining out" – that is, deciding what we share with the broader culture, and determining where we stand apart. It's not an either/or. It's a spectrum.

Joseph never let go of his difference, and the Maccabees shared in a Hellenized world. In our day, the boundaries between "us" and "them" are blurred, usually for good. Chanukah encourages us to ask where we can make our unique contribution, and how we can share our light with the world.

Rabbi Korobkin: And I write this while on a bus driving through the holy city of Hebron. The international community embraces the Jew with one arm while recoiling when we become too strong in realizing our homeland's manifest destiny. On the one hand, we've arrived, but on the other hand, we still have a ways to go.

Ultimately, the Torah describes us as a solitary nation, destined to remain distinct and separate. Chanukah celebrates that distinction. So while we gratefully celebrate with others in our wonderfully diverse Canada, we also remember that the lights of our menorah represent our uniqueness, the key to our centuries-long survival.

Dealing with the demand for cremation

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow
January 26, 2017

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

Rabbi Korobkin: There are rules dictating how one's body is to be treated after death. Our chevra kadisha (Jewish burial society) goes to great pains to bathe and clothe the body, and recite special prayers, all of which show great respect and sensitivity to the deceased's remains. Our tradition also calls for a Jew to be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

Above all, Halachah (Jewish law) absolutely prohibits cremation, and views it as an unnatural destruction of the body. And yet, today, for both social and economic reasons, more and more Jews are opting for unconventional care of their remains, especially cremation.

What do you do when faced with a congregant or a congregant's loved one who would like to be cremated? Is it an issue for Reform Judaism?

Rabbi Grushcow: My own strong belief is in returning the body to the earth whole, as we received it. But many Jews today choose cremation, and I believe that part of honouring them in death – not to mention comforting their mourners – involves honouring the choices they made in life.

The traditional reason behind the prohibition against cremation has to do with bodily resurrection, which many Jews do not believe in. (I happen to think that if God can resurrect the dead, God will be able to use whatever raw materials we provide.) The more modern, sociological opposition to cremation has to do with the horrors of the Holocaust.

But I have encountered Jews whose relatives were murdered in the camps, who want to be cremated precisely so they can feel a connection to their loved ones in death. For me, these are times when rabbinic presence and support are paramount. I will not turn away a Jew who wants a Jewish funeral, even if their choices involve cremation.

Rabbi Korobkin: Your desire to help our fellow Jew at this especially vulnerable time is certainly admirable. I would only suggest that two things be taken into consideration.

First, for centuries Jews have understood that burial is a biblical commandment (based on Deuteronomy 21:23). Leaving instructions to be buried is the last mitzvah that a person can fulfill. The midrash speaks of the very first person in the Bible to die, Adam's son Abel. Adam was distraught over what to do with his body, until he saw a bird taking

his mate's body and burying it in the ground. The midrash's message is that not only is this a biblical directive, but also a pattern of behaviour that occurs in nature. Had the Torah not commanded us to do it, we could infer it from the natural order.

Second, burial is characterized as "planting" in many traditional texts. Death is viewed as a temporary condition that will one day be alleviated through resurrection. The Talmud describes burial as the first stage of the resurrection process, enabling the body to one day sprout forth from its resting place and reunite with its soul. (That's not to say that resurrection won't occur for those who aren't buried, but burial facilitates that process).

While I appreciate that not everyone's sensibilities will be moved by these religious considerations, I hope that at least some people will think twice before opting for cremation.

Rabbi Grushcow: I encourage burial as well, which is why I am so glad that our congregation offers the possibility of burying cremated remains. We have recently created a section of our cemetery to do exactly that, so that the life of the deceased has a marker and the mourners have a place to go.

To be a rabbi in the modern age is to balance many roles. We are challenged to be both teachers and pastors, sharing Torah and healing hearts. When it comes to death and mourning, there is great wisdom that our religion can share and profound guidance in a time of loss.

The reality is that some members of our community will follow all the traditional rules, while many more will keep some and reject or reinterpret others. Often, you will find multiple approaches within the same family, and here, it's essential for people to speak to each other about their choices and their values. Above all, when our people are walking through the valley of the shadow, I pray we are able to walk with them.

The challenge of depicting God in art

By **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**
February 23, 2017

We do ourselves, and God, a disservice if we only portray God one way, yet without a mental picture, we could lose touch with a far-away and ethereal cosmic deity

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

Rabbi Grushcow: I am just coming back from a week of study in Israel at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. Once again, I am renewed by learning with rabbinic colleagues of all different denominations. Like our dialogue, it helps me appreciate both the unity and the diversity of our Jewish world.

I am also constantly impressed by the creativity of Israeli society. We went to a new exhibit at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, featuring Jewish and Israeli depictions of Jesus. It was a stunning collection, and I was struck by the freedom with which these artists approached – and sometimes appropriated – Christian imagery.

I was especially moved by Chagall's Yellow Crucifixion, showing Jesus with a Torah scroll against the backdrop of a pogrom. The use of a Christian image of suffering to depict a Jewish experience was striking, moving and challenging. Most of all, the museum reminded me how art can transcend taboos and make us think in new ways.

Rabbi Korobkin: Your experience reminds me of Chaim Potok's classic novel My Name is Asher Lev, about a young chassidic artist who paints a portrait of his mother being crucified. In the story, Asher Lev cannot find the appropriate Jewish symbol of martyrdom, so he chooses the Christian one instead.

The truth, however, is that suffering as a form of purgation is based in the Jewish Bible. Isaiah 53's "suffering servant" graphically lays the foundational doctrine – for both Judaism and Christianity – that one finds redemption through suffering.

Which leads back to your question about art. The Tanach is filled with art, because prophecy, the running narrative of all holy scripture, is essentially pictures. The Torah describes prophecy as a vision of an illustration or scene. Sometimes the vision is accompanied by words. Sometimes it isn't. The idea of a "picture being worth a thousand words" finds its origin in the prophetic experience, because images convey more profound ideas than words alone.

The only kind of art that Judaism does not allow is graphically depicting God Himself. Judaism is thus situated theologically in between Christianity and Islam. Christian art is drenched with illustrations of God and biblical stories, while Islam decries illustrating even

its prophet. But it is unquestionable that the artistic beauty contained in a painting can inspire and awe.

Rabbi Grushcow: Indeed. I would argue that the Jewish prohibition against visual representations of God has profound theological importance. When we draw God, we limit God. From this perspective, even language is limiting. I think that's why our tradition has so many different metaphors for the divine. Just within the Bible, God is depicted as both a man of war (in the Song of the Sea) and a woman in labour (in Isaiah). God is a father and a judge, a fountain and a rock. And when we go beyond the biblical tradition, we find tremendous – and sometimes shocking – creativity in the language of Jewish mysticism.

The lesson that I draw from this is that we do ourselves – and God – a disservice when we only describe God in one way (usually, as a male figure of authority). Our tradition offers us a theological toolbox in which we find many images and understandings, or perhaps a better metaphor would be a very wideranging and colourful palette.

Rabbi Korobkin: I agree. And yet, if we don't allow ourselves any mental vision of God, we run the opposite risk of losing touch with a too far-away and ethereal cosmic deity.

Theologians have thus expressed the tension that exists between transcendence and immanence – that is, blocking out any simplistic, anthropomorphized concept of God on the one hand, while at the same time imagining our personal God's gentle embrace enveloping us when we stand in prayer, experience a beautiful sunset, or during any other inspirational experience. Balance, as it is in so many other areas in life, is the best ingredient in developing a relationship with God.

How does upbringing affect identity?

By **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**
March 23, 2017

When you care about your Judaism, you want to pass it down, and when you find your own path, you hope your parents will respect it

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

Rabbi Korobkin: Let's do a thought experiment, shall we?

You're Reform, I'm Orthodox. But let's imagine you had been born in an Orthodox home. Where do you think you'd be today? Would you still be Orthodox?

What about your political beliefs? Were they shaped by your upbringing? By your religious choices? Do you think if you were raised Orthodox, you'd share most Orthodox Jews' political views, which tend to be more conservative than their liberal Reform brothers and sisters?

I find myself thinking often about these issues. While there are many Jews who become ba'alei tshuvah (returnees) and others who leave the faith, there's still a lot within our upbringing that influences our religious and political choices. How much of "you" is a product of your upbringing?

Rabbi Grushcow: I was raised in a Conservative Jewish home, with parents who were involved in the life of their synagogue. There were Shabbat dinners every Friday, shul every Saturday, and lots in between.

I am very grateful for the upbringing I received. From it, I got a deep sense that Judaism mattered, in terms of identity, belief and practice. I learned a love of Jewish life and engagement with Jewish community. I also learned a deep commitment to egalitarianism, and the belief that women had a right – and a responsibility – to take full part in religious life.

My grandparents, may their memories be for blessing, were also involved in synagogue life. I remember when I told my grandfather, a leader in the Conservative movement, that I would be training as a Reform rabbi. His response has always stayed with me: "We are all doing the same thing. We are all in the business of serving the Jewish People."

So whether it was through my Conservative upbringing, the wonderful Reconstructionist congregation I joined as a student in Montreal, the Orthodox synagogue I was part of while at Oxford University or the Reform movement in which I ultimately found a home, I learned two vital messages: that it's worth taking Judaism seriously, whatever path you follow, and that what unites us is greater than what divides us.

That being said, my experience with different Jewish contexts has also helped me articulate what I value about the Reform approach. I know why I stand where I stand, and I am grateful and humbled to represent our traditions.

Rabbi Korobkin: My religious identity was also formed to a large degree from my upbringing. My parents are from different worlds: my mother is a child survivor of the Shoah. Her father – a rabbi in Vienna – and mother were murdered by the Nazis. My father grew up in a traditional, non-Orthodox home in New York.

I was brought up Orthodox, but with a heavy dose of secular acculturation, since mom and dad have been in the Hollywood music business for decades. While I've evolved over the years, I still find myself gravitating to the Orthodoxy of my youth, which is a lifestyle completely committed to Torah, but which at the same time finds value and meaning in various elements of the parent culture. I believe that my more conservative political views are also a product of my upbringing and religious worldview.

For many others in my congregation, though, their religious identities were formed by making drastic departures from their parents' religion, some moving more to the right, while others moved more to the left. It often seems like people are either trying to recapture the memories of their youth or running away from them.

Rabbi Grushcow: It's easy for an older generation to feel rejected by the choices their children make, and for a younger generation to feel misunderstood. When you care about your Judaism, you want to pass it down, and when you find your own path, you hope your parents will respect it.

I don't know what choices my children may make. I am incredibly proud of my daughter, who was just called to the Torah last month as a bat mitzvah. But I hope that she and her sister will discover their own meaning and joy within Judaism, even if it differs from my way of doing things. And I am incredibly appreciative of my parents, who helped show me how much it all matters.

Instilling pride in Israel and Judaism

By **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**
April 20, 2017

For some, the appeal of being Jewish can be found in spiritual content, while for others, a sense of nationhood and making the world a better place lead to greater engagement

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

Rabbi Grushcow: I recently had the privilege of leading a trip of young Jewish leaders to Kenya to see the development work that Israel is doing there. It was an extraordinary eye-opener.

Israelis are sharing their expertise, helping turn the African scrub into farmland to help with food security, just as the early Zionist pioneers helped make the desert bloom. In the course of a week, we were introduced to the complexity of African politics, development work, Israel's international relationships, the Kenyan Jewish community, and so much more.

For many of the participants, the trip was an opportunity to see Israel in a new light, to engage with the ideals and realities of the country beyond the conflict. As strange as it may seem, being in Kenya gave us a sense of connection to Israel, and of pride.

With more and more young adults (and, in truth, Jews of all ages) feeling disconnected from Judaism and ambivalent about Zionism, what creative ways can we find to help increase engagement in the extraordinary story of our people?

Rabbi Korobkin: Now that we have our own land back, we have the strength and the wherewithal to fulfil our destiny to be a "light among the nations." But while your African excursion is an excellent way to strengthen our pride in Israel, I fear that those who have already been poisoned by the boycott, divestments and sanctions (BDS) will remain unmoved. Recall that the primary strategy of the BDSers is not to engage in dialogue and be open to other viewpoints, but rather to shut down all discourse and ban anyone with a pro-Zionist viewpoint.

Your strategy of re-engaging our youth is to instil them with a pride in our nationhood. I applaud that. The Orthodox method has traditionally been to engage our youth in the study hall and the home, and expose them to the beauty of Torah study and a beautiful Shabbat experience. By sharing the sense of spiritual meaning and purpose that comes with a religious lifestyle, many who are searching come back to their roots.

I'm not suggesting that my way is better than yours, but rather that our two approaches can complement each other. For some, the appeal of Judaism is in its spiritual content, while for others, it's found in national pride. As long as both ways lead to a path of reconnection, it's all good.

Rabbi Grushcow: I agree in your “both/and” approach, but I don’t see it as a division between our approaches. Rather, we do “both/and” all the time. For example, while I was with the group in Kenya, back home, a group from my synagogue went to the airport to greet our first family of Syrian refugees, expressing the Jewish values of welcoming the stranger.

In terms of communal participation, I continue to oppose BDS and anti-Semitism in all its forms. When someone else’s strategy is to shut down conversation, ours has to be on the side of increasing it. Ultimately, we are trying to build a Judaism that is proactive, not reactive. I think that was part of what was refreshing about the Kenya trip. It reconnected us to Jewish and Zionist ideals, and the central idea that, wherever we live, to be Jewish means to make the world a better place.

Rabbi Korobkin: While we continue to promote Zionism from our respective pulpits, many will accuse us of heavy-handed indoctrination, depriving our youth of “critical thinking,” and suppressing “social justice” from all those whom Israel oppresses. (The CJN regularly publishes articles from Jews of this ilk.) Your Kenya trip proves that while no people, including Jews and Israel, are perfect, the light and goodness that we bring to the world demonstrate a true desire to benefit all people, regardless of their race or creed.

This was the case in New Orleans in 2004, in Kashmir in 2005, in Haiti in 2010, in Japan in 2011, in Nepal in 2015, and continues in Gaza as we speak. I suppose we should take some kind of ironic pride in the double standard that is applied to Israel, since the world subconsciously expects more from the Chosen People than any other country on the planet. In any event, I hope that your efforts will reach some of the Jews whose voices are loudest in the Israel-bashing world.

Orthodoxy and the Jewish spectrum

May 18, 2017

By **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**

Do observant Jews ascribe value to how other denominations' members choose to practise?

And what do those sects think of the "authentic" brand given to traditional Judaism?

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

Rabbi Korobkin: How does the Orthodox community relate to the rest of the Jewish community? It's complicated.

Many Orthodox Jews are very comfortable participating in and contributing to larger Jewish community efforts, like Toronto's annual Walk with Israel, Limmud and various UJA Federation of Greater Toronto projects.

Others are less comfortable, fearing that too much integration might lead to an erosion of the values and lifestyle they've worked so hard to preserve for themselves and their children.

I try to remind my congregants – many of whom balance this limited integration – that the Orthodox community, per capita, benefits more from communal services than any other demographic. We have more children and we almost exclusively send our children to Jewish day schools. This means we are receiving a disproportionate amount of the scholarship allocations from UJA. That fact obligates us to express our hakarat hatov (gratitude) more than anyone else to the larger community.

Rabbi Grushcow: The concept of hakarat hatov is essential. We need to recognize the good we receive from each other and from the organized Jewish community as a whole.

At the same time, I wonder whether this gratitude can go deeper than appreciation of services and funding. For instance, I truly believe that Judaism is stronger because there are different entry points and different ways to practise. No single synagogue or denomination will be the right place for everyone.

So I can support someone finding their spiritual home in an Orthodox congregation, if that's the right fit for them. But can Orthodox communities do the same in return? Are you able to see other Jewish communities as equally valid, or is everything that is not Orthodox, by definition, second-best?

Rabbi Korobkin: It's a fair question, and you're likely to get different answers from different Orthodox authorities. Unquestionably, the Orthodox outlook is that God wishes for each and every Jew to live their life according to a system of Halachah, the laws and strictures that are laid out in our holy texts. If this were a perfect world and the Orthodox

community was doing its job of living and promoting Halachah properly, then Jews would be flocking to Orthodoxy in droves.

But alas, Orthodox communities, for a variety of reasons, haven't done an adequate job of modelling and promoting the beauty of the halachic lifestyle. As such, many see themselves as fitting better in a Reform or Conservative community. I feel that as long as their respective congregations keep them connected to our people, we have cause to celebrate.

That is why the only time I would condemn attending a non-Orthodox congregation is when the spiritual leader makes a habit of bashing the Orthodox. Fortunately, there are only a few rabbinic dinosaurs left in the field who practise that kind of archaic invective. The younger rabbis, such as yourself and most of my non-Orthodox colleagues in Toronto, convey a positive message of love, acceptance and mutual respect.

Rabbi Grushcow: Having spent significant time in my life living according to traditional Halachah, I know first-hand the beauty of that way of life. But I also have first-hand experience of its pitfalls.

The flip side of a close community can be insularity and exclusion. The flip side of believing you are living God's will can be the conviction that others are not. The liberal movements are born of the idea that rabbinic law – and even the Torah itself – come from specific times and places. Halachah, at its best, mixes creativity and continuity.

The fact that we practise Judaism differently, to me, is not a failing but a sign of strength. Just as our ancestors 2,000 years ago had no way of knowing rabbinic Judaism would prevail, we all are ignorant of which of today's forms will endure.

I will never participate in denigrating any form of Judaism. However, I disagree with the assumption I sometimes hear from, or about, Orthodox Jews – namely, it's the only "authentic" Judaism and therefore the only one worthy of support. As our ancestors taught, God's word is like a hammer striking a rock, with sparks going off in many directions; it is one voice, being heard in multiple ways.

Balancing community and society

June 22, 2017

By **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**

Tikkun olam is an essential part of Jewish values, responsible for engaging some community members, but perhaps it is secondary to ritual observance.

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

Rabbi Grushcow: Social action has always been a significant part of the Reform movement. In the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, our ancestors wrote: "We deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society."

Recently, I joined a team of temple members volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. For us, the work of tikkun olam (repairing the world) is an essential part of our spirituality and identity as Jews. What is your perspective?

Rabbi Korobkin: It's been suggested that Reform Judaism is far-sighted, in that it sees the problems of the greater society and of people outside the immediate community, but fails to address the issues in Jewry's own backyard. It's also been suggested that Orthodox Judaism is near-sighted, in that it focuses only on issues of Jewish interest and neglects its duty to the larger society.

This is an oversimplification, to be sure, but it outlines our different areas of focus. Recognizing that, traditionally, we've been more inwardly focused, our shul has made efforts to be more involved with the larger community and tikkun olam projects, such as feeding the homeless and getting more involved with civic leadership.

At a time when non-Orthodox day schools are imploding, however, I would present the question back to you. Tikkun olam is great, but it shouldn't be the primary focus of Judaism, at the expense of ensuring Jewish literacy and continuity. Jewish education and ritual observance is an essential part of Orthodoxy's spirituality and identity as Jews. What is your perspective?

Rabbi Grushcow: Just as your shul has made efforts to be involved with the work of tikkun olam, our shul is deeply involved in Jewish literacy and continuity. We have been since our very beginnings, as the education of our children and adults has always been central to our efforts.

In more recent years, we have celebrated a large cohort of adult bnei mitzvah, grown our Torah school for children, expanded our tikkun leil Shavuot and added depth and breadth to our adult learning. For us, ritual observance is closely related to education, so we encourage each other not only to learn the what and how of Jewish rituals, but also the why – and sometimes the why not.

I don't necessarily see non-Orthodox day schools imploding, but I do see new creativity and energy in Jewish supplementary schools like our own, which recognize that many parents may not want a day school education for a variety of reasons (cost, diversity, accessibility, etc.), but still care deeply about their children's Jewish knowledge. We also know that Jewish experiences, like summer camp and travel, can be formative as well – not to mention active participation in synagogue life.

For many of our members, the emphasis on tikkun olam and Jewish values has been what has drawn them in. People want to know that their Jewish communities can be pivotal forces for making our world better, whether it is by welcoming Syrian refugee families or making sandwiches for the homeless. I don't see it as an either/or.

Of course, tikkun olam is not the only focal point of Jewish literacy, continuity and spirituality – but we are not being true to our tradition if we omit it. It's hard for me to see how including tikkun olam in our mandate undermines all the other things we want to transmit. Rather, it's all about integration and living our values. I think of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching in 1965 with other civil rights leaders in Selma, Ala., saying he felt like his feet were praying. That's my Judaism.

Rabbi Korobkin: The image of Rabbi Heschel marching is indeed inspiring. But there are two ways to understand his words "My feet were praying." One way is that the march took the place of prayer. The other is that the march was consistent with an entire life filled with mitzvot.

I'm confident that Rabbi Heschel, who was completely observant, donned his tfillin and davened in his hotel room before embarking on the march. I even imagine the tfillin strap imprints lingering on his left arm as he marched with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. That's the kind of Jewish life to which we all can, and should, aspire.

Diaspora Jews are turning away from Israel. But why now?

August 6, 2017

By **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

Rabbi Korobkin: Many Jews in the Diaspora aren't so happy with the things going on in Israel. Some on the political left are influenced by the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement and are unhappy with the ongoing "occupation" of the West Bank. Others who have traditionally supported Israel's policies are now unhappy about recent decisions pertaining to the Kotel and the Israeli government's acquiescence to religious groups that wish to maintain Orthodox standards for conversions done in Israel.

To be sure, not all is perfect in Israel and there are legitimate reasons for discontent. But whereas in the past, most of us have supported Israel despite our disagreements, now, traditionally Zionist groups are starting to turn away from Israel. One respected rabbi recently said that Diaspora Jews should withhold their financial support for Israeli hospitals and other institutions.

What's happening, and why is it happening now? It certainly looks bad for Israel, but can this latest movement be good for Diaspora Jewry?

Rabbi Grushcow: I'm writing from the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, where I've been studying all month with rabbis of different denominations from across North America and Israel. One of our goals is to examine the relationship between Israelis and Diaspora Jews.

There is no question that the relationship is shifting. But the relationship still matters. In terms of pluralism, all of us want to feel like Israel truly is our homeland – that we can pray at the Kotel, that our identities are honoured, that our rabbis are recognized. It's precisely because we care – because we hold onto that Zionist dream of Israel as a home for all Jews – that we raise our voices.

Pluralism is not the only issue. Most Israelis don't refer to "occupation" in quotes – they are all too aware that for 50 years, we have been holding land taken in war, without either annexing it fully or giving it back. Whatever your ideology, the situation is far from ideal.

My question is: what is the best way for Diaspora Jews to support Israel and to share honestly in its struggles? Israelis have no qualms about having different points of view – why can't we?

Rabbi Korobkin: The Hartman Institute stands as a shining example of how Jews of different ideologies can come together, agree when possible and disagree respectfully on other things, all while sitting as one mishpachah.

So I agree: "raising voices," as you state, is what we should all be doing. Let's raise our voices both when we agree and when we disagree. Let's raise our voices when tragedy and violence strike Jews and non-Jews alike. But raising voices is quite different from what we're witnessing today. I can't recall a time when I've seen such overt calls from community leaders for Jews to discontinue their support of the most vital infrastructures in the Jewish state. And by all means, if you prefer "occupation" without the quotes, more power to you. Let's have an open dialogue about what's on the table to bring peace.

But the "red line" for all Jews has traditionally been that while we vehemently disagree on how to move forward, we will never withhold our support. That's what's changed, and that's my call to you: are you and your colleagues still fully "in" when it comes to supporting Israel? Where's your "red line"?

Rabbi Grushcow: It seems as if you are creating a litmus test for loyalty, based on contributions. I think the relationship goes deeper. I can't speak for other Jews – I can simply say that I and the other rabbis I know, of all denominations, continue to be passionate about Israel. We study here, we bring trips here and we support the causes we hold dear – as do our congregants.

Israel doesn't need us to fund its infrastructure. As one of the Israeli speakers at Hartman said, Israel doesn't even need Diaspora Jews to be advocates – rather, he said, it needs us to be character witnesses who can speak about our love for Israel. It is that love that I fear the government imperils when it makes Jews feel alienated in their spiritual home.

When Rosh Hashanah reopens old wounds

September 8, 2017

By **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

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.