

Expanding Our Boundaries

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776/2015

As a child I was fascinated by boundaries. I studied the globe in my room. Why did some states or nations have straight lines, while others had jagged ones? Why was a boundary drawn here and not there? Later I was seduced by the idea of explorers literally filling in the blank spaces on maps. Where I grew up every single street had a sidewalk. And so I loved Shel Silverstein's "Where the Sidewalk Ends."

There is a place where the sidewalk ends
And before the street begins,
And there the grass grows cool and white,
And there the sun burns crimson bright...
Let us leave this place where the smoke blows black
And the dark street winds and bends.
And watch where the chalk-white arrows go
To the place where the sidewalk ends.

The very concept that there was a place where the sidewalk ended was enticing, mysterious, dangerous. Was the end of the sidewalk an invitation or a warning? Was it okay to go there?

We have entered a new chapter here at Temple Israel. As part of this new chapter, we have expanded the boundaries of our community in so many ways.

As of last January we, your clergy, will now have the honor of being able to officiate at a Jewish wedding for an interfaith couple. This is a congregation actively opening its doors for those seeking to participate in Jewish life. This is a community that welcomes families of every variation into our midst. I have officiated two memorable Jewish weddings for interfaith couples in recent months and look forward to many more in the years to come.

We have moved our worship outside the walls of this building. Hundreds of you have joined us as we have taken our Shabbat to Compo Beach or to our lawn for Shabbat Under the Stars. In each location we have taken advantage of the unique settings nature affords us to pause, slow down, consider our lives, and connect with one another.

We have begun to expand the boundaries of Jewish education by implementing an online learning curriculum in 4th grade. In each of the past 3 years our high school youth have embarked on social justice trips to New Orleans, San Francisco and Atlanta.

I am certainly aware that religion has gotten a bad name because all too often it has been used to impose requirements and strictures, to limit, to exclude, to build up walls between people. That does not describe the Judaism we live here at Temple Israel. This is a congregation that challenges us to expand our boundaries with authenticity and creativity.

I recognize that some of what we have done this year – or changes that were made in prior years – has made some of us a little uncomfortable. Exploring where the sidewalk ends is inherently unsettling. But a little discomfort is also very Jewish. Our tradition has always reimagined itself. That has been the key to its endurance.

At their core these High Holidays mark an opportunity to take account of our lives. Starting tonight we are asked to assess the path we have traveled. If, looking back upon the year, we aren't a little uncomfortable then we're not looking closely enough. It's up to each of us to determine where we stand in relation to the goals we've set and to figure out where we want to go in the year ahead.

Tonight I'd like to speak about a way in which each of us can grow. Each of us has an ethical comfort zone. Beyond lie our personal ethical boundaries. And just as I am proud that our congregation has begun to expand its boundaries, I'm also proud that over the years we have expanded our own ethical margins as well.

In so many ways, our lives are not bounded as they once were. The boundaries of communication, social interaction, geography, gender, and politics have fallen – or been blurred. Many behaviors that were once considered unacceptable are now seen as normative. We can recall a time when single motherhood, inter-racial couples, and tattoos were all considered taboo. When I was in high school it was definitely not okay to be openly gay. But it's also truly remarkable to note how far we have come in such a short time. I officiated my first same-sex wedding in 2007. We watched over the past 10 years as same-sex marriage was legalized first in just a handful of states, then more and more year by year. This Rosh Hashanah we celebrate the fact that marriage equality is now a recognized constitutional right across all 50 states. This is just one example of how over the years we have grown – both as individuals and as a society – by expanding our ethical boundaries bit by bit. Thank God, we have come so far.

Without question, one of the most extraordinary stories of this year has been Caitlyn Jenner: her very public, unapologetic transformation from Olympic gold medalist Bruce – the very epitome of masculinity! – into fashionable, coiffed Caitlyn. As we watched her transition from man to woman we were intrigued, and possibly a little were mystified. Personally, I can tell you that watching it all made me uneasy. And for that I am sorry. Jenner is made in the image of God, as we all are. And thus I am also proud of her. By using her public platform, she has forced us to grapple with the acceptance of – or our resistance to – transgender identity. That is a topic many of us would have preferred to comfortably ignore for many more years.

Because of Caitlyn I was pushed to reconsider my notions of gender and sexuality. This is a space of productive discomfort. She has prompted us to broaden what we consider the normative range of human experience. And I think there's great value in that.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler was a 20th-century Jewish philosopher who was influenced by the teachings of the mussar movement – a movement of rabbis who sought to focus intensely on personal behavior and ethical choices. Dessler wrote about ethical decisions using the imagery of modern warfare.

When two armies are locked in battle the place where the struggle happens is called the front line. On either side of the front line there is territory that belongs to that side and thus is not the location of the battle. The front moves and changes, but the struggle occurs only where the two sides meet. Our ethical choices can be thought of in a similar way. There are decisions that we have made so many times that they are no longer decisions. It is obvious to us that we will respond in particular ways to particular events. These are choices within our territory. The place of ethical decision [is the front line]. This is the point where our values come into conflict and thus the choices are not obvious. Each individual's ethical decision point is unique, and it moves as we grow and change. By recognizing the ethical decision points we face, we are able to set our sights on expanding our moral territory and thus becoming better people.¹

We make ethical decisions every day, mostly without even thinking. So too each of us has an ethical “decision point.” That’s the crucial juncture when we encounter something that unsettles us. It’s where we wrestle with our assumptions and our ingrained patterns. It is the space in which we ask ourselves, What’s the right thing to do?

Dessler illustrates his point by using the example of one who is raised to be a thief. For him, stealing is not an ethical decision point – he does it all the time and thus it is firmly within his territory. But the thief may face an ethical decision point when he’s finally nabbed in the act of larceny. Should he shoot his way out? For him, this is his crucial choice.

We are not thieves, but the same is true for each of us. There are ethical decisions with which we are very comfortable. And there are crucial questions that lie at our personal ethical decision point.

In fact, each of us has expanded our personal ethical boundary more times than we can count. Perhaps that decision point was forced upon you the first time you met an openly gay classmate or co-worker. Perhaps you embraced that decision point when you decided to volunteer on a regular basis at Gillespie House or another soup kitchen.

Sometimes it takes being thrust into an unexpected situation to learn where our decision point lies. On May 12 of this year, two young men entered Temple Israel with the intention of protesting a Friends of the IDF event. Within moments, our Executive Director Lisa Goldberg, our Director of Member Engagement Bryan Bierman, our Cantor Dan Sklar and our Assistant Rabbi PJ Schwartz, took action. They confronted the intruders without any hesitation, physically subduing them, tackling them to the ground and restraining them until the police

¹ Dessler, Rabbi Eliyahu, “The Free Choice Point,” in *Strive For Truth*, translated by Rabbi Aryeh Carmel and paraphrased in AJWS curriculum.

arrived. They did this all without any consideration of whether they were putting themselves in danger.

Their immediate action demonstrated that for them, there was no decision point at all. Protecting this synagogue, and the people inside its walls, lay firmly within their ethical territory. For that we are not only profoundly grateful; we are deeply proud.

Other times, if we choose, we can intentionally expand our personal ethical boundaries.

When I was living in Manhattan I was troubled by people asking for money on the sidewalk and on the subway. Each time I was approached, I would wonder, should I give this person money? Will he really use it for food, or might he buy cigarettes? Is this woman's story about her sick child true, or is she making it up? If I decided I was feeling generous, I would dig around in my pockets for change. Sometimes I would find some. Other times not and I would sheepishly shrug, as if to signify, "At least I tried." That was a cop-out, to be sure. If I knew that I had a single in my wallet I would discreetly take it out and give it. But if I wasn't sure, I wouldn't risk taking out my wallet and finding only a five, or God forbid a twenty.

Eventually I made a decision. Two decisions, actually. First I decided that I would follow the teaching of Rabbi Chaim of Tszanz: "Better to give to a hundred beggars who do not need the money than to reject just one who does."² So I determined I would give to absolutely everyone who asked. I went to the bank and got \$20 in singles. I would carry some of those bills around with me wherever I went. That way I always knew that I had a dollar to give to everyone who asked. The \$20 or so that I would go through each month didn't make that much of a difference to my bank account. But the knowledge that I gave to everyone who asked removed a persistent ethical dilemma from my soul.

Every one of us has a story like this. Every one of us once struggled with a difficult question. Every one of us once took on a personal practice or habit that moved us forward. It might not have had anything to do with giving tzedakah. What did it feel like when you grappled with an ethical decision? What helped resolve the conflict within you? How did you move forward?

A friend of mine and his wife decided to fulfill the mitzvah of giving 10% of their post-tax income to tzedakah. They were already generous people. At the same time, 10% was a lofty goal, as it would be for many of us. But they wisely started slowly, giving just a little more each year. Little by little they inched their decision point forward. Before they knew it getting to 10% did not seem like such a big leap after all. My friends saw they'd had at least a little impact when, years later, their now-grown son earned his first paycheck and called to ask, "Is it 10% of gross, or 10% of net?"

² Paraphrased from Rabbi Chaim Halberstam of Tszanz, as quoted in *Introduction to Judaism: A Sourcebook*. New York: UAH Press, 1998. Page 137.

So think for a moment... What are you presently comfortable with ethically? Good for you. I applaud that you know the answer. But then I'd also ask, What's next for you? What ethical decision might you take on, or what are you struggling with right now? What is currently outside your comfort zone, and what would help you advance this point within your ethical territory?

Undertaking this task will mean different things for different people. There are those in our congregation who devote considerable time and talents to educational programs in Bridgeport. There are families who, instead of giving gifts one night of Chanukah, together allocate tzedakah to various different charities. There are neighbors who have begun composting, or purchased electric cars. We have friends who have visited the developing world and spent time in slums getting to know people who live on the equivalent of less than a dollar a day. Where do you stand in the national conversation about immigration? Whatever you give to tzedakah, could you commit to giving a little bit more? Where is your ethical comfort zone? Where are your boundaries?

Discomfort is essential to these Days of Awe. If we remain where we're comfortable we will never grow. Who we are today is not who we want to be tomorrow. Rosh Hashanah is that opportunity to expand – or even test – our boundaries. Tonight we assess where we stand, and push ourselves to the next ethical challenge. That is the only way we can become what we yearn to be.

When asked if he followed certain commandments, Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig offered the wry answer, "Not yet." We all have a "not yet." We're doing a lot, but we could be doing more. We're doing plenty and yet not enough. There is a Jewish urgency to reject complacency.

So tonight I ask, where does your sidewalk end? Where are the blank spaces on your map? What's next for you? As this New Year begins, let's explore together.

Ken yehi ratzon – may it be so.