

Agents of the Divine Plan

Ora Horn Prouser

The description of God's creation in the first chapter of Genesis portrays a world of beauty and completeness. Each element of creation is seen as having a proper place, part of the grand design. The structure of the work, the beauty of the language, and the repetition of "God saw that it was good" all combine to emphasize the rightness of the world as it was created. The animals and the humans play their respective roles in maintaining an orderly cosmos.

This picture of the world, however, does not last long after that first psalmlike chapter of Genesis. Immediately, in the second chapter of the book, the course of events seems to diverge from God's original plan with its introduction of the uncertainty of human development and decision-making. The relationship between God and humanity is further challenged after the flood. God, thinking that there was too much evil in the world, decided that a new beginning was necessary. After the flood, as Noah, his family, and the animals disembarked from the ark, God recognized that human beings had significant moral limitations, and God's original, lofty expectations for humanity would need to be reconsidered (Genesis 8:21ff), given that humanity had evil tendencies. God had to redefine what could and could not be expected of humans.

God's example in Genesis informs our discussion of special needs. God models an accepting and loving stance toward humanity, lowering the bar while still maintaining realistically high standards. God never gives up on people or their ability to accomplish, but rather accepts that the vision needs to be changed. God's relationship to the first generation of humanity thus begins with anticipation of a beautiful and orderly creation, and quickly unfolds as that of a loving parent, sensitively confronting a child's unforeseen special needs.

Throughout the Bible, leaders are chosen whose limitations are as well known as their talents. We know that biblical characters are less than perfect both in their moral judgments and familial relationships. Rather than an ideal of perfection, characters with pronounced disabilities are found to accomplish their divinely ordained assignments. Moses, the great spokesman of the Torah, had a speech impediment.

When Moses expressed his fear of representing God and facing Pharaoh due to his speech impediment, God said: "Who placed a mouth in human beings or who makes one mute or deaf or open-eyed or blind? Is it not I, YHWH? (Exodus 4:11) God explicitly claimed responsibility for creating people with special needs, who also should be considered reflections of the Divine image, no less capable of being agents of the Divine plan due to their limitations.

The Jewish community should follow this biblical example. We need to be inclusive and recognize the needs and potentials of those with social, emotional, educational, and physical disabilities in our community.

We need to work to make intensive Jewish education available to all segments of our population. While we create and maintain strong, integral Jewish connections for our children by involving them in synagogues and sending them to Jewish schools and summer camps, our community neither advocates adequately nor makes available sufficient opportunities for children with special needs.

Perhaps this should be among our most urgent mandates for the coming century: to provide substantive and compelling Jewish education for all those who are able to learn: *la-na'ar al pi darko* – sensitively tailored to every student's unique needs and personal condition. Beyond this, we need to recognize that learning styles have an impact beyond the classroom. Learning styles and disabilities impact on the ability of a person to sit in a synagogue service, to attend all kinds of summer camps, to go on a teen trip to Israel. Our efforts must go beyond minimal support services in schools or an occasional summer program. Only by remembering that all people are created in God's image and by acting on this principle do we likewise merit God's acts of lovingkindness and acceptance. The "People of the Book" should be the first to recognize the loss humanity would have suffered had Moses not been allowed to speak.

Ora Horn Prouser is Professor of Bible at the Academy for Jewish Religion. She is completing a book, Biblical Personalities in Light of Special Education, to be published later this year by the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

To the Editor:

Groucho Marx once said, "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member!" I thought of that wonderfully revealing quote as I read Rabbi Richard Marker's advice about how synagogues can and should transform themselves. (*Sh'ma*, 30:564).

As North American Jews, all of us are free to associate with other Jews in pursuit of the holy, or not; to strive to be counted as members of a community, or not; to pursue *mitzvot* in the context of community or in isolation; to belong, or not to belong.

As long as our society remains free, there will always be people who, like Rabbi Marker, deliberately and intentionally choose not to belong. (You have to be pretty committed to remain unaffiliated for twenty-five years.) Let's take these folks seriously. Let's treat them with respect. Let's not assume that if only synagogues were to be transformed, the unaffiliated would flock to join.

Yes, synagogues should transform themselves, but not in order to attract those who don't wish to join. Rabbi Marker suggests that the ideal synagogue would be one where he

could remain anonymous. ("Americans often feel most comfortable when their anonymity is maintained.") One doesn't need a synagogue to remain anonymous.

I would like to see shuls help people realize that as individuals, they matter, rather than expend any effort assuring them that they don't. A synagogue, in my view, shouldn't be a "substitute community," or a "virtual community." It should be a *kehillah*, a real community, a *kahal kadosh*, a community devoted to the pursuit of the sacred. Such a community necessarily makes demands on its members, the most fundamental of which (axiomatically) is that they belong.

Folks who are ambivalent about belonging will never feel entirely comfortable in a community that values its members.

Rabbi Marker offers valuable advice: The synagogue will fail if it tries to be all things to all people. Shuls should take that advice. They should be warm, inclusive environments. Synagogues should not be transformed to serve the hypothetical desires of people who, no matter what, would rather be shopping.

Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Needham, MA

To The Editor:

Thank you for the range of opinions you presented on the issue of outreach to non-Jews (October, 1999). As for Egon Mayer's position, it is hard to understand what his program of outreach with no religious message would achieve, except to accelerate the hollowing out of Jewish life. If we stand for nothing, then what would we be offering those to whom we reach out? Jack Wertheimer's concern for preserving religious standards seems to me to be on the mark. But why should that preclude outreach to non-Jews?

Opening the door does not have to mean lowering the bar (it might even help us to raise it). We strengthen our committed core by working with those who are most receptive to our religious message, regardless of their origin. In that vein, disentangling the issue of outreach from that of intermarriage (as Gary Tobin suggests) is long overdue. Being married to a Jew does not necessarily make one more (or less) receptive to our religious message.

Rabbi Michael Wasserman
Birmingham, AL

Non-Profit
US Postage
PAID
Permit No. 1906
Southern, MD

Change Service Requested
Post Office Box 1019
Manchester, NH 03105

Sh'ma
D'var