

The Glory of Differences

נ"ה

Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Ki Tetze

Do not plow with an ox and an ass together. (Deuteronomy 22:10)

Why not? Traditionally, we have understood this stricture as preventing unfairness to both animals. The ox, being so much stronger, would do most of the work, and so it would be unfair to the ox to yoke it with a donkey. The donkey, on the other hand, would have to work so much harder to try to keep up with the far stronger ox, and so yoking them together would be unfair to the donkey. We are reminded that discrimination is unfair not only to those against whom it is directed but also to those who seem to benefit from it.

But there is another level to the Commandment. The tales and the lessons of the Torah do not only describe events and give instructions on a physical or historical level (regardless of whether or not one believes in the historicity of the tales); the Torah also speaks about a spiritual level, a soul level, and describes the individual psyche of every reader.

In the United States, we proclaim our devotion to “rugged individualism.” Even while doing so, we carry ourselves in a way designed to make us as much like everyone else as possible. We dress in the same style as most of our colleagues (however we may define “our colleagues”). We live in houses as similar as possible to those of most of our colleagues (but, if we can, just a bit better). We speak in the same manner as do most of our colleagues; we pursue the same hobbies; we enjoy the same music. In short, while we proclaim our devotion to “rugged individualism,” we do our very best to try to “blend in.” Our actions, contrary to our rhetoric, declare our belief in a “one size fits all” way of life.

The Glory of Differences

© Copyright 2003 Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

This document may not be reproduced (in whole or in part) in any manner, including, without limitation, print and electronic media, without the written permission of the copyright holder.

But the Torah teaches us, **Do not plow with an ox and an ass together.** We are not all the same, and we need not all behave in the same manner.

I long wondered at the rhetoric of the extreme right wing, especially the homophobic rhetoric. Recognizing same-sex unions, they claimed, threatened the stability of “the American family.” I was at a loss to understand how one couple’s choice of each other as life partners could affect the stability of another couple’s choice. The answer came to me in looking over this verse. Despite the American rhetorical devotion to individualism, the American consciousness seems actually to be devoted to sameness. It is not the stability of “the American family” that the homophobic right wing is defending, but the stability of the American “one size fits all” consciousness. And that is wholly contrary to what the Torah teaches!

“If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man He would have made me so in the first place. He put in your heart certain wishes and plans, and in my heart He put other desires. Each man is good in His sight. It is not necessary for eagles to be crows.”
–Sitting Bull, 1876

Do not plow with an ox and an ass together. Those who are different may not be forced to conform to the same mold; both have their places, and those places need not be the same. Responding to a wholly different question, the Talmudic sages declared that it was to the greater glory of G*d that billions of human beings, all made in the mold of the original Adam, are all different. G*d’s glory is served by the glorious and magnificent range of differences among human beings, not by an enforced sameness.

To a realization of the greatness of our variety and of our many ways of serving our Creator, may we speedily be led.

Shabbat Shalom.