

Hearing Torah Differently This Year: What Receiving Torah teaches us about Embracing Neurodiversity

A Yom Kippur Sermon for Parashat Nitzavim September 21, 2016

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Our Torah reading begins with the verse: “*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei Adonai Eloheichem*” — “You are standing today, all of you, before Adonai your God.”

These are the opening words of our Torah portion, Nitzavim.

And then, instead of simply saying “all of you,” Torah gives us a list of who was there:

It is a remarkably specific list.

“Your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, every Israelite, your children, your wives, the stranger in your camp, from the woodchopper to the water drawer to enter into the covenant of the ETERNAL your God.

And then Moses says that this covenant is not only with those standing there that day, but also “**with those who are not here with us today.**”

Our tradition understands this to include future generations — and, in some interpretations, those who will one day join the Jewish people.

Which means that, in a very real sense, **all of us were there too. And as we read this portion today, we** ourselves imagine being at Sinai.

What did you experience?

What did you hear?

What did you see?

What did you feel?

The Torah gives us a remarkable answer.

When the Israelites encounter God at Sinai, Exodus tells us:

“V’chol ha’am ro’im et hakolot” — “And all the people saw the sounds.”

They **saw** the sounds. Perhaps this was seeing lightening at the exact same time as hearing the thunder. Or perhaps, as Rabbi Akiva, in the Mekhilta, understands it, this moment was so awe inspiring that the ordinary boundaries between the senses are disrupted: they saw what is usually heard, and heard what is usually seen.

Today, we have a word for experiences in which the senses overlap in unusual ways: **synesthesia**. Some people, for example, may experience sounds as having colors, or associate words or numbers with particular shapes or sensations.

Synesthesia is one example of the many ways human brains can experience the world differently.

I love the possibility of seeing a hint of neurodiversity in this ancient rabbinic interpretation. At the very moment when the Jewish people are receiving Torah, they don't all experience that revelation in the same way.

And Rabbi Yochanan gives us another extraordinary image. In Exodus Rabbah, he teaches that God's voice at Sinai divided into many voices and languages, so that each person could understand it (auditorily, visually, kinesthetically). The voice reached the young and the old, everyone **according to their capacity**. Receiving Torah was an example of radically inclusive learning.

Perhaps those who were deaf saw the Torah, those who were blind, heard it, and those who were differently abled physically, felt in their bodies.

Revelation meets us differently — through what we hear, what we see, what we feel, what we notice, and what captures our attention?

As Director of Congregational Learning, and through my work with our Temple preschool, and my son's IEP team, I spend a lot of time thinking about how people learn, receive and process information, and how they communicate.

And this is what led me to the work of Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne and her idea of **“Neurodivergent Torah.”**

And this year, I am hearing Torah differently.

Rabbinit Dr Shayne isn't simply asking us to identify neurodivergent people in the Torah or even neurodivergent Torah commentators, of which there likely several if not many. She asks us to use neurodivergence as a **lens for reading Torah itself** — to see whether different ways of thinking, perceiving, communicating, and experiencing the world might help us discover meanings we otherwise would have missed.

She writes about looking for “**some kind of understanding or meaning beyond awareness of diversity.**”

That idea feels especially powerful to me.

Because inclusion isn't only about making sure everyone has a place.

It is also about asking:

What might the rest of us learn because you are here?

Jewish tradition has always made room for multiple ways of experiencing Torah. We argue with it. We notice tiny details. We tell stories from it and commentaries about it. We sing it. We question it. We hold it.

Think about the Four Children of the Passover Haggadah. Each encounters Torah differently, and each requires a different response or way of understanding the story.

So I wonder:

What does Torah look like when we allow different kinds of minds to teach us what Torah can mean?

What if the person who notices what everyone else overlooks has something essential to teach us?

What if the unexpected question opens a door into Torah that the rest of us couldn't see?

Perhaps that is part of what it means to say:

Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem — all of you are standing here – and – all of us were there

Not because we are all the same. But precisely because **we are not.**

Nitzavim describes a community made up of different generations, different roles, different experiences and different needs. And the covenant extends beyond the people physically standing there that day.

It reaches toward people who have not yet been born and people who have not yet joined the Jewish people.

The covenant – and Torah itself - is so much bigger than we thought.

And perhaps this is a model for what our community can be: a place that not only makes room for different people, but believes that different ways of thinking, learning, communicating, experiencing the world, and encountering God are essential, and indeed beautiful.

Rabbanit Dr. Shayne writes that our task is to support people **“in the way that best honors who they are rather than try to turn them into someone else.”**

I have a friend, Becca, who is an occupational therapist. She wears a shirt that says:

“All brains are beautiful.”

I think that is a profoundly beautiful, inclusive and very Jewish notion.

Not because every brain works the same way but precisely because they are all different.

Because every person is created *b'tzelem Elohim* — **in the image of God.**

And so perhaps the question we should be asking is not simply, “How do we accommodate people who are different from us?”

But:

How can I grow more fully into myself?

And:

How can I help you to become more fully the person you were created to be?

That is a question I ask myself as a parent, as a rabbi, as a teacher, and as a member of this community.

Because when I look around our congregation, I know that we are all standing here differently.

Some of us hear every word and some focus on a feeling. Some need to read the translation before something makes sense. Some of us feel the music – ancient and contemporary songs. Some want every theological or grammatical detail; others experience Judaism primarily through relationships or experiences. Some need movement. Some need stillness. Some have a hundred questions. Others have none.

And yet—

Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem.

All of us are here today.

All of us are part of the covenant that is sealed when we receive Torah again and again.

All of us have a place.

And perhaps, even more importantly, **all of us have something to teach.**

The challenge of community is not simply to gather people who are alike. It is to gather together with people whose ways of seeing, hearing, thinking and experiencing may be different from our own —

A Torah big enough for all of us.

So this year

May we notice more deeply.

May we make room for minds and experiences different from our own.

May we seek to understand and communicate more carefully.

And may we remember:

Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem.

All of us.

All of us are here.

And all of us have Torah to teach.

Shanah Tovah.