

**“The Healing Balm:
Reconciling Differences in Family, Faith and Community”**

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Rabbis preach on contemporary issues as much, if not more, than they do on biblical or post-biblical texts. Nevertheless most first check to see what the scriptural portion is for that week for it can be the basis for a subject that goes beyond the scriptural realm. But, as my homiletics professor often said, “Don’t make the text into a pretext!” Nevertheless when one draws an idea from either Hebrew or Christian Scriptures, most clergy know in their heart of hearts that sometimes it’s relevant and sometimes not. For rabbis in particular, sometimes we get lucky when we’re in the Books of Genesis or Exodus. Sometimes, when the cycle brings you into Leviticus, well, you’re usually not that lucky.

So let’s go back to the end of the Jacob/Joseph saga, and what a story we have! Jacob is about to learn that his son Joseph is indeed alive though all along his other sons have declared him dead...knowing full well he wasn’t. But how would Jacob receive this incomparable good news? The sages of old were concerned about this for they believed the shock would lead to his demise. And so those same sages came up with a story to fill in the blanks as it were, something we Jews are really good at when it comes to biblical texts. They said someone special had to bring him the news, not just “anybody,” not his sons for sure.

The “someone special” was the daughter of Jacob’s son Asher, a woman named Serach. This granddaughter was said to have a beautiful yet gentle voice and a powerful spirit. Her songs acted, as our sages describe, as “a healing balm for Jacob” anytime he had a fitful night. Yes, she was to tell him.

There are always days when each one of us could use a “healing balm” to calm our nerves, and sometimes those days move into months, even years. The last few years have divided families what with political differences, what with issues concerning the pandemic, what with vaxxers and anti-vaxxers, what with the steady rise of racism and antisemitism, what with...well, alas there are far too many “what withs.” Wouldn’t you agree?

Who said it best? This quote has become famous and lives even thirty years later, “*Can’t we all just get along?*” It was said by Rodney King after his experience with the Los Angeles police. From my perspective it’s so messianic. Now understand that my idea of “messianic” is most likely different than yours...a lot different, in fact. Liberal Jews don’t believe that one person is the messiah, rather we believe in a messianic age. We believe the work can’t be done **for** us. When we tire of the injustices, wars, hatred and the like, and when we join together to eradicate them, that’s the messianic age.

Whether or not you or I utter that plea of Rodney King, the same idea runs through our minds. Or shall I say, the same idea **SHOULD** run through our minds. As mortals, as women and men created in God’s image, we should be able to be civilized, to hold conversations, to not be judgmental, to care enough for each other regardless of our views to appreciate the value of **every living person**. I know very well, believe me I do, that it’s so easy to say that, but unfortunately it is getting more and more difficult to accomplish the task.

The blessings of this country are manifold, but nowadays the one that speaks to me personally is the freedom to think and express our views...and to do so in a democratic process where no one lauds any singular idea over us expecting us to not only accept it but to do so without thought and debate and reflection.

In my tradition there are no popes. Not only is each synagogue its own unit, its own legislature, as it were, but while I, as spiritual leader of the congregation, am allowed – encouraged, in fact – to express my thoughts. I should not, however, be able to veto anything. Each faith community, each denomination, each branch, each church, in fact each clergy-person has the absolute right to voice what is in his or her heart, but in my estimation, the eye should always be on one goal, namely, the **good of the community**.

We have an expression, *l'shem shamayim*. It means “for the sake of heaven.” As long as what is voiced doesn't create schism it is *l'shem shamayim*. And if it does result in brothers and sisters against sisters and brothers, it is a *shandeh*, translated as “shame,” but truly meaning a blot on the reputation of the one or many whose words are not a healing balm. We need more people like Sherach who sing the song that reaches into our souls so that love and understanding can emerge from the words and the melody.

For a couple of years I was part of the conciliation process of my religious movement. When the congregation and the rabbi cannot agree, not about some egregious matter but on more mundane matters that have created schisms, they call in – or they should call in – members of the team, one rabbi and one layperson – to speak to both parties. The team offers what hopefully is a just solution. Sometimes we do agree with the rabbi; sometimes we recognize the points made by the congregation. We realize that indeed it was a blessing that we were called before the situation got out of hand, for we have seen what happens when rifts are so great even congregations find themselves with irreconcilable differences so that separation, the creation of two, maybe more, congregations, is in the best interest of all.

Who wins in situations such as this? No one! Everybody loses!!

Now look at our current atmosphere...if it's bad for a faith community, just think how much worse it is for a family, nuclear or extended; how much worse it is for the citizens of towns and cities. Do we dig in our heels or, for the sake of heaven, lift ourselves out of the mire of divisiveness and do whatever we can to mend, to heal?

I have none of the answers. Honestly I don't. I only know that I and others who know about the consequences from the rifts we see, who care about you, you and you regardless of your point of view, must do what we can to be something of a healing balm, and to bring others on our side to do the work of conciliation. Let me stress that I'm looking at it from my theological perspective with respect to the Messianic Age. Bluntly stated, if we wait for a messiah it might be too late. If we recognize our responsibility, chances are better – not perfect – that progress can be made. It's up to us.