

## R-E-S-P-E-C-T

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Aretha Franklin's father was the Reverend C.L. Franklin. He was one of the most popular preachers of his generation. He was nationally known through his tours and through radio broadcasts as well as recordings. In his church, it was a very lively service. He preached in the style of black preachers and he was a very engaging and dramatic preacher. People would get up and dance in the aisles, wave their arms and shout "Yes, yes! Amen! Amen!"

In her autobiography, Aretha recalls from her youth that there were nurses at her father's church who used to carry smelling salts to revive worshippers who were so overcome with emotion during his sermons that they fainted in the aisles. My son Menachem heard Aretha Franklin tell this story in a Fresh Air interview on NPR and he immediately texted me: "Dad, I know the High Holidays are coming... the bar has just been raised!" Oy!

Well, I don't know that any of you will need smelling salts today! But just in case you do, you'll find them taped underneath the last seat in each row. I see some of you are looking! Just kidding, of course!

Aretha Franklin got her start singing gospel in that church; but she soon developed her own unique style blending her gospel with jazz, blues and rock and roll. The radio stations didn't know what to call it, but a nice Jewish boy, record producer Jerry Wexler -- who introduced white listeners to Aretha's music -- started calling it R&B. That name stuck, creating a new genre.

And of course, we all know the song that launched Aretha Franklin's career, that first major hit that put her on the map: RESPECT. "Respect" was originally sung by Otis Redding as a man's plea for respect from his wife. But Aretha flipped it and added that catchy call and response and the words "sock it to me, sock it to me" making it a woman's righteous demand for respect. The song touched something deep inside each one of us and transcended its lyrics to become a universal demand for respect for all peoples and an anthem for not one but three different freedom movements: civil rights, women's rights and gay rights. Aretha's battle cry, R-E-S-P-E-C-T, reminds us that every human being deserves to be treated with dignity.

It does not matter if you are a man or a woman, if you are able-bodied or differently-abled, if you are cis-gender or transgender, gay or straight. It doesn't matter if you are black, or brown or white, if you are Jewish or Christian, Muslim or Hindu, or Sikh or Buddhist or secularist. It doesn't matter if you are a native born, or a refugee, a documented or an undocumented alien, or a foreigner. It doesn't matter if you are a Republican or Democrat, a progressive liberal, a tea party conservative, a populist, a capitalist, a socialist, a communist, an anarchist. It does not even matter — if you are Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, Reform, Humanist or some yet to be invented Jewish label. It just does not matter.

We all carry many labels. Your right to be treated with respect, with dignity, with kindness and love comes with the single most important part of your identity: You are a card-carrying member of that most precious of all societies: the human family. That's it.

That's enough. You don't have to prove anything. You don't have to earn anything. You don't have to earn my respect. You, my friend, as a human being, are deserving of respect. You deserve to be valued as a human being and to be treated with love and with kindness.

Our Declaration of Independence declares that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In 1848, the

First National Women's Rights Conference, in Seneca Falls New York, issued the Declaration of Sentiments which demanded that the same equality and rights be extended to women, and it would take until the civil rights movement for that phrase to be applied equally to African Americans, and until the Supreme Court decision in this century to apply to same sex couples. Over the centuries this country has continually expanded its definition of equality to include all human beings.

And that core American notion -- the equality and dignity of all -- has its roots deep in our 4000-year-old Jewish tradition, which from its inception has insisted that equality and dignity are every human being's birthright stretching back to the creation of the first man and woman.

The Torah tells us that God created human beings in God's image: *b'tzelem Elohim*. And no matter how different we may seem to each other, we all bear that divine stamp. The midrash describes it this way:

A flesh and blood king mints coins bearing his likeness and every coin is exactly the same as the next. But the King of Kings mints coins bearing the Divine likeness and each one is entirely unique, different from all the others, and yet each is in fact a perfect image of the Divine.

That's why Rabbi Akiva taught that the greatest commandment in the entire Torah, the one which serves as an organizing principle for all the others, is: Love your fellow human being as yourself. That's why the Torah commands us that we must love the sojourner and the stranger in our midst, and that there must be one law for the citizen and the stranger.

Why? Because, as the Torah explains "You were once strangers in the land of Egypt." In other words, you have known what it feels like to be disrespected, to be treated as a subject of fear and hatred, to be marginalized, disenfranchised and disempowered, to be cast aside as "other." So, you must make sure no one else is ever treated as "other" again. On the contrary, we must treat the stranger in the same way that we treat our family and friends, with love, kindness and compassion.

This principle of the sacred value of every individual becomes ensconced in Jewish values and Jewish law as the principle of *kavod habriyot* – the obligation to honor every human being as a creation of the Divine. The Talmudic commentator the Meiri teaches that there is no virtue more beloved than this. In fact, this principle of *kavod habriyot* -- honor toward all God's creatures -- is such a core Jewish value that – like *pikuach ha-nefesh*, the saving of a life – it even overrides other commandments and requirements of Jewish law.

For example, technically each person that has an aliyah to the Torah is supposed to read that aliyah from the Torah. Did you know that? You come up, you do the blessings, you read. But the rabbis ruled that the blessings and the readers should be separated so as not to embarrass those who could not read from the Torah and marginalize them from participation in the service.

And *halakhah* permits the use of microphones and hearing aids – even our new hearing loops – on Shabbat and festivals so that those who have difficulty hearing should not feel embarrassed or unable to participate fully when they come to services. It is the same reason we allow streaming to be accessed by those who cannot be in shul. Indeed, for the same reason we will God-willing -- at some point in the not too distant future -- install an electrically powered door at one of the two main entrances from the Linden Family Courtyard for those for whom the door is too heavy and forms an impediment to their joining us.

*Kavod Ha-Briyot* also forms one of the core arguments in my halakhic paper permitting homosexuality and same sex weddings.

Do you remember many years ago when, on Sukkot, -- I know there are many here who were present at that moment -- We placed the Torah in the ark, we sang *Etz Chaim Hee*, we closed the

ark, I turned around to give my sermon... and the Torah came flying out of the ark and landed on the bimah between the two podiums? The entire congregation let out a collective audible gasp and froze, so upsetting was it that the Torah had fallen.

Respect for the Torah is so important that – as I taught that day – if you are present when a Torah falls, you must fast sunrise to sunset for forty days -- no kidding! That's how serious it is, the idea that the Torah was somehow dishonored. We have to do penance for it. So we fast for forty days. If you are unable to fast for forty days, you give *tzedakah* every day for forty days, in place of fasting. But the point is that we must do penance -- a severe penance -- not something lightly that passes in a moment, not just "I'm sorry" -- because we have disrespected the Torah. One halachic authority summed up best the primacy of *kavod ha-briyot* by this teaching: "According to all opinions the humiliation suffered by an individual is more serious than that suffered by a Torah scroll." That might seem obvious to us. But then again, maybe it is not.

*Kavod habriyot* – honoring the basic dignity of every human being – is not just about kindness to the stranger in our midst, nor is it just about honoring those who are of different backgrounds or appearance or ability. It also means honoring those who hold different beliefs and perspectives on the world than our own. It means that when we vehemently disagree with a person, we still treat them with respect, kindness and love.

And treating them with respect means we also have to have respect for the views that they hold. That does not mean we have to agree with them. It does mean that we talk with them, not at them, that we open ourselves up to listening and truly hearing what they say, that we strive to understand what shapes their views, to affirm their feelings and needs and to seek to find common ground.

Sadly, there is not a lot of listening happening these days, and not a lot of *kavod ha-briyot*. It seems that we as a nation and we the Jewish people are more divided than ever. Increasingly, we remain in our own echo chambers, watching the news channels that parrot back our viewpoint, friending only those who agree with us, only talking with those who are like minded and often attacking and demeaning those whose views are different than our own. We talk past each other instead of with each other. Or we simply don't talk at all. But not talking is even worse. If we are ever going to heal as a nation we are going to have to listen to each other.

Our friend, Alan Gottlieb shared with me that Rabbi Jack Engel in Delray Beach, Florida was planning this holiday on telling his congregation the following: "You know I often ask you to not talk during services. But this year I am giving you permission to talk for ten minutes to someone that you like... only on the condition that you also take ten minutes during the service to talk to someone that you don't like." I give you permission to try that challenge tomorrow... but you have to do both.

I want to do something similar today. I want you to identify someone with whom you totally disagree. Someone who is so far on the other side of the spectrum or an issue that it is hard for you to imagine that the two of you could ever common ground.

Maybe that person has 20 guns in their house, or maybe they think restaurants should have multiple restrooms for many different genders. Maybe they are an ardent supporter of President Trump, or maybe they are a Bernie Sanders progressive Democrat. Maybe they support settlements in the West Bank, or maybe they think settlements are an obstacle to peace. Or maybe... they are happy LeBron is going to Los Angeles. If that last one is you, we have to talk after the service so we can talk!

And then once you find this person, I want you to invite that person to join you for lunch. Tell them that at lunch you just want to listen, not talk. To understand what keeps them up at night, what are their greatest worries, needs, hopes and dreams. Tell them you want to know what are the formative experiences that shaped their world view and their stance on the issue that divides you. Remember,

at this lunch your job is to listen. Tell them at a second lunch you hope they will listen to you as well, but only after you have listened to them.

And when they ask you why you are doing that, you can tell them that your crazy rabbi spoke on the holiday about respect – R-E-S-P-E-C-T, about *kavod ha-briyot* – the Jewish value of honoring the dignity and sanctity of every human being, and that he asked you to do this.

And at that lunch, if you listen carefully enough, you will discover that you are not as different as you may have thought, that despite the gap between the two of you in outlook or issues that you in fact share a great deal in common, and that even if you cannot agree with their stance, you are able to relate to and appreciate what leads them to their conclusions, the experiences and feelings that shaped them, and to affirm the validity of those experiences and feelings. And in affirming them as a human being, you will find you will be drawn closer.

May this year be the year that we truly begin to listen each other, and to treat every human being -- without exception -- *with kavod ha-briyot*, with the honor, dignity and love that they deserve. Amen.