

TRADITION, EVOLUTION, LOVE, AND DIGNITY

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“Sometimes we evolve and we change so that human dignity, all humans, all of us, as we now know, are worthy of all the love and dignity of the Divine Image.”

How do we find the courage to change? How do we find in this and other challenges the ability to look truth in the eye and realize what needs changing for good?

While we're in the middle of this global rite of passage, many of us are frequently asking, how can we be here for each other more? For ourselves more? How do people in the Jewish community, in the global community, grow from here for good?

We all turn to our elders and our teachers for insights. One of my teachers was Helene Aylon, whom we lost during the Covid-19 pandemic. Helene was born in Borough Park 89 years ago in a Hasidic community. She grew up to become a matriarch, an important feminist artist, and a friend to many. During the High Holidays, Helene always sat in the front row of our shul, these last years with a walker, and she will be very missed this year — like so many. Like so many, she leaves behind a legacy.

Helene dedicated years to a project entitled “Liberation of G-d,” in which she highlighted Biblical verses of controversy, where perhaps the lessons from the time of the Torah's origins no longer hold up. They raise questions about ethical behavior and human dignity, and her intention was always to discover God's meaning.

In Helene's memory and honor, I want to explore a verse from the Torah that is difficult for me and for many of us.

In Parshat Acharei Mot, the overarching teaching that God gives us is to live a holy life. Shortly after that commandment comes other verses, such as the one that says, “A man will not be with another man sexually as with a woman; it is an abomination.” I'm an openly gay man, I'm 51 years old, just a little older than Stonewall, and I was so lucky in my life as a gay man who grew up religious to have teachers who said, “We love our tradition, and we have the courage to look it in the eye and say sometimes we evolve and we change so that human dignity, all humans, all of us, as we now know, are worthy of all the love and dignity of the Divine Image.” It's the challenge of evolution. The challenge of change, of adaptability — this relay race of tradition.

I hope during this time, we all rise to the challenge to look in the eyes of truth, of status quo, of life as we know it, and figure out how we can change so that all are included and everybody lives the better life these verses promised us.

