

Every Person Counts
Temple B'nai Shalom
Braintree, Massachusetts
Rabbi Van Lanckton
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Every Wednesday morning, I drive into Boston to the Beethoven Elementary School. I spend an hour there tutoring second graders who are learning to read.

I started doing this about a year ago. Last fall, I started with a new class. As I did the previous year, I introduced myself and asked the kids who wanted to talk with me to tell me their names.

When I returned to the class the following week, I greeted one little girl I had met the previous week. I said, "Hi, Patsy."

Her eyes grew big and her smile engulfed her little face. She said, with amazed wonder and pleasure, "You remembered my name!"

We want to be recognized. We want people to see us as individuals. We want people to remember our names. We want them to know who we are.

In America today, we must resist the temptation to treat other people as representatives of some group rather than as individuals. Call it stereotyping. Call it discrimination. Call it racism, or anti-Semitism, or Islamophobia.

In whatever guise, there are forces that push us in the direction of being blind to each other as individuals and to see and judge each other instead just by the outwardly visible evidence of our group.

In 2015, there were 941 incidents of anti-Semitism in America, an increase of about 3 percent from the 912 incidents recorded in 2014. And last year, in 2016, there were 1,266 such acts, an increase of 34 percent over the year before. Even worse, by the end of April there had been 541 acts of vandalism, violence and harassment against American Jews, which is 86 percent more than in the same period the year before.

In my opinion, having read the details of only a few of these incidents, the perpetrators rarely if ever know any Jews personally. They commit these acts of hatred against a group. They are harming individuals, but without knowing any of the individuals.

The news is also filled with reports of attacks on Muslims, and in some cases these are attacks on people who are not even Muslim but are targeted by ignorant people who can't tell the difference between a Muslim, a Hindu or a Sikh.

The Southern Poverty Law Center identifies and tracks the activities of hate groups. These are groups whose beliefs or practices attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics. The Center currently identifies 917 such groups. Of these 101 are anti-Muslim and 100 are White Nationalists. In Massachusetts, we are relatively fortunate; there are only twelve hate groups here, compared with 79 in California, 63 in Florida, and 55 in Texas. The many thousands of members of these groups do great harm, while often knowing not one of the individuals in the groups that they hate.

The practice of despising groups without recognizing the humanity of any of the individuals in the group runs counter to the most basic of Jewish values. As we learned this morning in our Torah reading, each individual is precious. Our tradition teaches that we are each made in the image of God. Our creation story tells us that all of humanity descended from just one couple, Adam and Eve, so that we are all one human family.

This value is reflected dramatically in the Jewish legal rules regarding the practice of capital punishment. The rules appear in a section of the Mishnah that governs the operation of the Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish court in Jerusalem.

The Mishnah begins with a description of the warning that the judges give to witnesses in a capital case. The Mishnah then continues with a discussion of the uniqueness of every human being and the consequential extreme severity of capital punishment.

These are the words of the Mishnah:

How did the Court instruct witnesses in capital cases? They brought them in and instructed them as follows:

“Capital cases are not like non-capital cases: in non-capital cases a man may pay money and so make atonement, but in capital cases the witness is answerable for the blood of him [that is wrongfully condemned] and the blood of his descendants [that should have been born to him] to the end of the world.”

The proof for this rule is found in the story of Cain, who murdered his brother Abel. In that story, God says to Cain, “The bloods of your brother cry out to Me.” It does not say, “The blood of your brother.” Rather, it says, “The bloods of your brother.” This means not only Abel, the murdered brother, but also the blood of all his descendants to the end of time.

The text of the Mishnah goes on to say:

Therefore, but a single person was created in the world, to teach that if anyone has caused a single life to perish, that person is deemed by Scripture as if he had caused a whole world to perish; and anyone who saves a single life is deemed by Scripture as if he had saved a whole world.

A further teaching from the same source: But a single person was created for the sake of peace among humankind, that one should not say to another, “My father was greater than your father.”

And a further teaching: But a single person was created to proclaim the greatness of the Holy Blessed One; for humans stamp many coins with one seal and they are all like one another; but the King of kings, the Holy Blessed One, has stamped every human with the seal of the first man, yet not one of them is like another.

That final statement is the essence of our duty to see the humanity in each individual. Not one of us is like another. Even more so, we cannot judge an entire group and dismiss the group from our concern, or worse, take hateful actions against individuals in the group. This is the fundamental basis for our opposition to racial or religious discrimination.

This year two of our Circuit Courts of Appeals, for the Ninth Circuit and then for the Fourth Circuit, affirmed this principle in ruling against the Executive Orders limiting travel to the United States from seven, then six, countries with predominantly Muslim populations. In both cases the courts found that the orders were founded on anti-Muslim religious discrimination and therefore violated the United States Constitution. I have read both opinions. I agree with them. I predict that the United States Supreme Court will affirm that they were correctly decided.

We, as individuals, should not discriminate. Our government is, thankfully, prohibited by our Constitution from discriminating.

Our representative form of government honors, at least in theory, the right of all adult citizens to participate by voting. We have had a legal standard ever since 1962 that is known as “one person, one vote.” In that year, the Supreme Court held in Baker v. Carr that it had the authority to strike down federal voting district lines drawn by legislatures if they diluted this principle. Two years later, in Reynolds v. Sims, the Court extended that ruling to apply also to state legislative districts.

Two weeks ago, on May 22, the Supreme Court struck down two North Carolina congressional districts. The Court ruled that lawmakers violated the Constitution by relying too heavily on race in drawing them. That decision could affect many voting maps, generally in the South.

The decision was the latest in a series of setbacks for Southern legislatures. In recent cases concerning legislative maps in Alabama and Virginia, the Supreme Court has insisted that packing black voters into a few districts — which dilutes their voting power — violates the Constitution.

It also violates the principle that every person counts as much as every other person. From the Sanhedrin and its rules on capital punishment to the Supreme Court and its rulings on voting, we see a common pattern: each of us matters.

One other field of law in which we will probably see more litigation concerns voter suppression in the name of preventing voter fraud. Any serious study of voting in America has concluded that voter fraud is a miniscule problem. There are some, however, who claim to believe it is widespread and must be combated by severe laws to restrict voting.

The effect of such laws is to discriminate against disadvantaged groups, and thus deny the rights of individuals to participate in our democracy by voting.

These laws take various forms. They include:

- Laws that impede or limit voter registration by limiting the times and places when registration is permitted.
- Unnecessarily burdensome identification requirements, such as photo ID requirements that are intended to affect minority, handicapped and elderly voters disproportionately because they do not normally obtain identification documents such as driver's licenses.
- Impediments to voter registration that make it more difficult for people to register to vote.
- Purging of voter rolls that disproportionately removes groups considered likely to vote against the party engaging in such purges.

Two weeks ago, on Friday, May 19, on a commuter train in Portland, Oregon, a white man was shouting anti-Muslim insults at a black 16-year-old girl and her 17-year-old friend wearing a hijab. Three brave passengers stepped forward to protect the girls.

These three men were outwardly very different from each other: a 23-year-old recent Reed College graduate with long hair; a 53-year-old Army vet with a trim haircut and a record of serving in Iraq and Afghanistan; and a 21-year-old poet and Portland State student heading to his job at a pizzeria.

What united the three was their decency.

When they intervened, the man harassing the girls pulled a knife and slashed the three men before fleeing. The attacker killed two of the men; the third survived his wounds and is likely to recover.

Nicholas Kristof wrote about this attack last Thursday in The New York Times. His column was titled “Spitting in the Eye of Hatred.” His column concludes with these words, endorsing the importance of recognizing each other as individuals and not merely as members of groups:

The three men in Oregon understood that, in a healthy society, Islamophobia doesn’t disparage just Muslims, racism doesn’t demean blacks alone, xenophobia insults more than immigrants. Rather, we are all diminished, so we all have a stake in confronting bigotry.

I began with the story of a little girl named Patsy who was thrilled that I recalled her name. I conclude with an encounter on the sidewalk in front of my house in Newton.

We live across the street from the Countryside Elementary School. Last winter, soon after President Trump issued his first Executive Order restricting admission to travelers from seven predominantly Muslim countries, I saw out my front window a woman helping her children into her car after school. She was wearing a colorful hijab.

I walked out my front door and went to the sidewalk and greeted her. I said, “Pardon me. I would like to speak with you. Am I correct that you are Muslim?”

She said she was, a little warily because we were strangers.

I said, “I just want you to know that I don’t want you to be afraid. Most of the people I know in Newton have nothing against Muslims and don’t agree with the President’s pledge to block Muslim immigration.”

She was pleased and thanked me.

A few days later, my doorbell rang. She had come to my home with her three children on a snow day, bringing home-baked cookies, to thank me again. I invited her in for a cup of tea. I learned that she and her husband are highly educated engineers who came here from Turkey and now have green cards and are eager to become citizens. I spent some of my childhood in Turkey and have some drawings of scenes in Istanbul on my dining room walls; we hit it off and had a lovely conversation. She has since invited Alice and me to her home for a brunch.

We owe it to both our Jewish and American values to get to know people who are in groups other than our own and break down barriers of prejudice and bigotry. We want to be known as individuals, and so does everyone else.

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I ended the service with the following prayer:

Ribono shel olam.

We are blessed to live in a country in which our Constitution guarantees to each of us that no state shall deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. We each are equal before the law, and precious in Your sight. May it always be so.

And let us say, Amen.

Shabbat shalom.