

*More Than the Sum of Our Parts – Kol Nidre*  
*October 1, 2025 – 10 Tishrei 5786*  
*Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester*  
*Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith*

*[Since October 7, 2023, many of you have come to me troubled – troubled by a sense of dislocation, feeling unwelcome among people you once considered allies, shaken by the words of columnists with whom you used to agree. I have felt much of this myself. This sermon is my attempt to make sense of those feelings.]*

We are more than the sum of our parts. More than heads, shoulders, knees, and toes. More than tissues and neurons, fluids and bones. More than the collection of experiences and the twist of a double helix – nature and nurture matter, but I feel in my deepest core that I am not reducible to DNA or the accidental incidents of life. Our relationships, too, transcend arithmetic. Yes, many are transactional – you take the kids, I’ll get the dry cleaning; I’ll make dinner, you do the dishes. But sometimes something greater happens: a college hallway conversation that bends time, a date where you glimpse a future spouse, the instant you hold your newborn child. In those moments we know that relationships are more than one plus one. Wonder teaches the same truth: the sunrise over an alpine valley can be explained by endorphins, light refraction, chill air, tectonic force and yet – the experience is more. What do we call that more? Spiritual, magical, transcendent, holy, awesome – or perhaps we call it God. That conviction that we are more than the sum of its parts honors the divine spark that makes us human.

Jewish tradition places that assertion of something more right in the first chapter of the Torah. “And God created humankind in the divine image, creating them in the image of God – creating them male and female.”<sup>i</sup> All the rest of creation God deemed good or even very good but only humans had a divine spark placed within them. From this divine spark, this something more, our ancient rabbis taught a profound commitment to equality and dignity for all people. Why, they asked, was Adam created alone? “To teach that anyone who destroys one soul is as if he destroyed an entire world. And conversely, anyone who sustains one soul is as if he sustained an entire world.”<sup>ii</sup> Each person is infinitely and uniquely valuable.

The rabbis taught further, “A single person was created for the sake of peace among humankind. Since we all descended from the same person, one cannot say to another, ‘My ancestor was greater than your ancestor.’ After all, go back far enough and we all have the same ancestor.”<sup>iii</sup> Apparently 2,000 years ago, as is still true today, people needed to be reminded that, in the end, we are all human and therefore, fundamentally equals and endowed with a spark of the divine.

Unfortunately, as we all know too well, that value of universal equality has slipped as the oldest hatred has reared its head.

Antisemitism is alive and well on college campuses, in Western Europe, at the UN, and in the media including, and amplified by, social media. And it’s not just happening far away. I hear it in your voices – from parents whose children call home shaken by the rhetoric on their campuses, from congregants who tell me about subtle but stinging comments in their workplaces, from

those who wonder if it's safe to show their Jewish identity in public. This is not theoretical. It is personal, it is local, and it hurts.

Most shockingly to many of us, the groups with whom we have associated in our fights for justice and freedom, our allies in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights and black rights and environmental justice and reproductive justice – many of these groups now only offer us conditional acceptance. We are welcome – but not the fullness of us. That hurts. Because if we find the divine in being more than the sum of our parts, what happens when we are told to set some of those parts aside? Nothing good.

Part of the problem may be disagreements about the war in Gaza. But I have come to see that much of the problem is actually a spiritual crisis: we no longer recognize that we are all more than the sum of our parts. Instead of seeing that divinity in one another, we see each other as only groups, categories, or labels. Instead of the profound equality among people – what we share – we focus on the differences between us, the identity groups into which we fall. Instead of looking for what is uniquely beautiful and different in people, we boil them down to their gender or race or sexuality or religion or immigration status or political party. If all we can see are those pieces, how can we possibly glimpse the “more than,” the spark of divinity in which God dwells? We cannot.

In his remarkable book, *The Identity Trap*, Yascha Mounk details the rise of what he calls the identity synthesis.<sup>iv</sup> He chooses that term to avoid terminology that makes us run to our political corners, terms like DEI or wokeness or political correctness or cancel culture. I will also use identity synthesis this evening since my goal is not to win a Thanksgiving political argument with overused rhetoric. My goal, instead, is to ask if the focus on identity groups truly honors the dignity of each person in a way that promotes justice. Mounk suggests that true justice is not about labels or categories. I would add that it rests instead on the divine spark which transcends them.

The logic of the identity synthesis goes like this: if injustice was once carried out against a particular group, then justice requires we now treat people differently because they belong to that group. Mounk argues that that approach risks replacing inequality with identity-based division. While we may see short term gains for groups who have tragically experienced identity-based discrimination, true justice comes when people are treated with dignity and equality regardless of group identity, not because of it. We can do better. As moral visionaries like President Kennedy insisted, “It ought to be possible... for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color.”<sup>v</sup>

Mounk gives another powerful example that touched all of us. During the worst of the COVID pandemic, when vaccines and treatments like Paxlovid were scarce, societies had to decide how to ration them. But when a New York doctor urgently prescribed Paxlovid, the pharmacist asked for the patient's race. Influential policymakers had made racial equity the primary factor in triage instead of simply trying to save the most lives.<sup>vi</sup> Racial disparities in health outcomes are real, reflecting decades of discrimination,<sup>vii</sup> and they must be fought through the battle for true equality and access. The question is not whether to fight discrimination, but how best to do it. Unfortunately, some in the medical community chose to favor one racial group over another –

even if that meant more people would die. I cannot help but wonder whether a different approach might have saved more lives.

While the rights and opportunities of historically marginalized groups have significantly improved over the last 100 years,<sup>viii</sup> discrimination is still a serious problem. If you were born Black, you are more likely to live in a dangerous neighborhood,<sup>ix</sup> have fewer educational opportunities,<sup>x</sup> and earn less than white contemporaries<sup>xi</sup> – not to mention the daily indignities of bias.<sup>xii</sup> I cannot pretend to have lived that experience, but I can and must listen to it. And from my place, I can say with conviction that my dignity and the dignity of those who suffer discrimination are bound up together. Those who suggest identity-based solutions to inequalities like these do so with the very best of intentions. Having grown impatient with pace of universalist aspirations, proponents of the identity synthesis want to raise up people who have been historically oppressed. Yet I’ve come to believe that while identity-based solutions may temporarily address a real disparity, their focus on differences will ultimately prove counter-productive. It will stymie progress towards true equality. It will challenge the ability of diverse populations to live together, and even threaten our democratic norms.

Why does an emphasis on identity categories push us apart and is it possible for society to foster respect and dignity for all its diverse citizenry? Sociologists know that humans are good at forming in-groups and out-groups<sup>xiii</sup> and history shows the capacity for societies to treat the out-group in unspeakable ways. History shows that when societies rigidly enforce identity categories, those categories almost always lead to discrimination, oppression, and worse.<sup>xiv</sup> On the other hand, the philosophically liberal tradition of equality-for-all has been a successful path towards truly diverse societies in which commonalities are highlighted and differences tolerated or even respected and celebrated.<sup>xv</sup>

Far-right ideologies say we should limit our circle of care to those in our group. The identity synthesis that has become associated with the progressive left says that we should treat people differently based on the group to which they belong. Both ideologies, left and right, divide people instead of uniting them.

For most of the last 75 years, the Jewish community has experienced welcome and acceptance in America. No matter how we identified politically, no matter the causes we advocated or the clubs we joined or the sports we played, our trajectory has been up and our acceptance has grown. We were welcome in coalitions fighting all manner of injustice. And our efforts in those circles yielded real fruit in the fight for equality for all. But now things have changed. The emphasis on identity group has caused our erstwhile allies to view us not as individual compatriots joining in common cause for the greater good, instead, the emphasis on identity group has brought about the exclusion of Jews from some spaces and only the conditional acceptance of Jews in others. In the cases when they will accept you, they will often only do so if you are the “right kind of Jew” which could mean anything from rejecting certain political candidates to denying Israel’s right to exist to rejecting any notion of Jewish peoplehood. This sort of rejection stings even more for those of us who are committed to the cause of justice – dignity and equal rights for LGBTQ+ people, racial equality, reproductive rights, the fight against poverty, and climate change. I have not abandoned those struggles; I only refuse to abandon part of myself in order to participate.

The identity synthesis has worked its way into the mainstream in profound ways. From affinity groups in schools and corporate America to government programs and benefits. It has become mainstream because good people want to solve real problems, problems of equality and justice that our society has not adequately addressed. The path forward on those issues, the path forward for the Jewish community does not mean rejecting the people who promote the identity synthesis, the path forward means offering a substantive alternative. It means offering a vision of equality for all, of compassion and justice and righteousness in line with America's promise of E Pluribus Unam, out of many one. A vision that seeks an equal society, that rejects discrimination, a vision rooted in the truth that every person bears the image of God.

Group identities are real and they do matter. As Jews, we know the importance of community and identity. We know the strength and comfort and meaning that we draw from our own unique culture, history, faith, and folkways, in other words, our group identity. Equality does not mean erasing difference. The pursuit of equality can only succeed when combined with the affirmation of our uniqueness. As Jews, we have always used our distinctiveness as a source of strength in service of ourselves and of universal aims. We are committed to using our particular identity to drive a universal moral project rooted in the commitment that every person, every one, is created in the image of God.

We need look no further than our Passover story to understand how we have always strived to use particularism, how we use our group identity. What lesson do we take from our enslavement and redemption? It could be that we should watch our backs, protect ourselves, and shun the other. But no, over and over again the Torah and our liturgy demand, "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."<sup>xvi</sup> Our group's particular history leads to a universal morality. It calls us to feed the hungry, clothe the orphan, and seek peace with Jew and non-Jew alike.<sup>xvii</sup> Our Jewish identity teaches us to care for the vulnerable not because of who THEY are but because of what WE experienced. We do not reduce people to their identities and treat them accordingly. We use our identity as a source of strength to make this world a better place for all. How transformative it would be if every community drew on its unique identity as a wellspring for serving others.

This is the conviction that drives my commitments to racial justice, to LGBTQ+ dignity, to the rights of women over their own bodies, and to all who suffer inequality. God commands us to remember our oppression so that we will extend empathy to others who experience it. We uphold our unique identity and a universal conscience. As we will read tomorrow in the Torah, we strive for a society where everyone's dignity, everyone's divine spark, is honored by equal, shared laws, rights, and privileges.<sup>xviii</sup>

I do not want to be boiled down to anyone of my identities. Yes, I am: husband, father, Jew, New Yorker, white, American, Zionist, straight, cis-gendered, and rabbi. But I am more than those things. While we draw strength and meaning from each of our identities, each of us is more than the sum of our various identities. The divine spark within us cannot be divided out by identity group. That spark makes us spiritual beings, inspires awe and transcendence, demands dignity, evokes compassion, lifts us above the animal, makes us each utterly unique, and connects us to God. Treating any one of us, treating anyone at all, based primarily on their identity group erases so much of that. And while we may be tempted by potential short-term gains, in the end, treating

others based primarily on their identities only threatens to exacerbate the painful divisions in our society while doing injury to the spirit. Once we see this, once we internalize it, we can do the hard work to build a society of true equals, a society that addresses injustice and discrimination based on the individual dignity and uniqueness of each person. Honoring the spark of the divine in all people will help to tear down the divisions between us rather than reinforce them. It is that spark in each person that will allow us not only to achieve true equality, but will affirm the prophets' vision of a world in which we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God and with one another.

כּוּ יְהִי רַצּוֹן

Ken Yehi Ratzon

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 1:27

<sup>ii</sup> Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Mounk, Yascha. *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*. Penguin Press, 2023.

<sup>v</sup> Kennedy, John F. "Report to the American People on Civil Rights." 11 June 1963. The American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-and-television-report-the-american-people-civil-rights](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-and-television-report-the-american-people-civil-rights). Accessed September 29, 2025.

<sup>vi</sup> Bruce, L. & Tallman, R. "Promoting Racial Equity in COVID-19 Resource Allocation." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 47(4): 208-212, 2021.

<sup>vii</sup> **Commonwealth Fund**. *Advancing Racial Equity in U.S. Health Care*. 17 Apr. 2024, [www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/fund-reports/2024/apr/advancing-racial-equity-us-health-care](https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/fund-reports/2024/apr/advancing-racial-equity-us-health-care). Accessed 25 Sept. 2025.

<sup>viii</sup> Hochschild, Jennifer L. "The Past & Future of American Civil Rights." *Dædalus*, vol. 140, no. 2, 2011, pp. 31–50. American Academy of Arts & Sciences, <https://www.amacad.org/publication/daedalus/past-future-american-civil-rights>.

<sup>ix</sup> Yang, Tse-Chuan, Aggie J. Noah, and Daniel A. Maxwell. "Population Health and the Dynamics of the Racial Structure of Neighborhoods." *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 170, Dec. 2016, pp. 72–80. *PubMed Central*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.10.008>.

<sup>x</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Racial Inequities in Education*. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022, <https://www.aecf.org/resources/racial-inequities-in-education>

<sup>xi</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury. *Racial Inequality in the United States*. U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/racial-inequality-in-the-united-states>.

<sup>xii</sup> "Race in the Elite Workplace." *Richmond Law Magazine*, Univ. of Richmond School of Law, Winter 2021, <https://lawmagazine.richmond.edu/article/-/24334/race-in-the-elite-workplace.html>.

<sup>xiii</sup> Tajfel, Henri, et al. "Social Categorization and Intergroup Behaviour." *European Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1971, pp. 149–178. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420010202>.

<sup>xiv</sup> Brubaker, Rogers. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Harvard University Press, 2004.

<sup>xv</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

<sup>xvi</sup> Exodus 22:20

<sup>xvii</sup> Mishnah Gittin 5:8

<sup>xviii</sup> Deuteronomy 29:9–14