



Parshat Ki Tavo
18 Elul 5778—September 9, 2017
**The Buoyant Baker in the Flooded Bakery:
A Principled Defense of Non-Judgmentalism**
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

Last year on Rosh Hashanah eve, my family started a new tradition. It had to do with dessert. We had never had one go to dessert. Dessert could be lots of different dishes. But last year, on the first night of Rosh Hashanah, we had pecan pie. I am not even a pecan pie fan. But this was the best pecan pie ever. This was the best dessert ever. It was archetypal, platonic form, pecan pie perfection. The pecans, the chocolate, the crust, the filling, quite simply no one had ever experienced a dessert like it. We decided then and there that at future family occasions, this pecan pie was our signature move.

In part it was the quality of the pecan pie. But in part it was also the incredible back story. The pie was baked by a bakery called Three Brothers. The three brothers were all survivors of the Shoah. Remarkably, miraculously, all three brothers somehow survived Auschwitz. After the war, they came to America as immigrants. They opened a family bakery. That bakery has been owned and operated *m'dor l'dor*. This is the second generation, the children of the three brothers. This pecan pie embodied therefore not only great baking, but literally Jewish history and destiny, resilience and grit, in every morsel. We were all set up to have Three Brothers pecan pie again in a couple of weeks for Rosh Hashanah eve, the second anniversary of our new pecan pie tradition.

There is only one problem. This year there will be no pecan pie. Three Brothers Bakery is located in Houston.

When I heard about the flood, I reached out to one of the owners of Three Brothers, a woman named Janice Juker whom I once had the privilege of meeting. Our conversation was, in a very deep way, a revelation.

On the one hand, what she described was utter and complete ruination. Her bakery is totally flooded. The water intruded so massively, so violently, so furiously, that it literally tore doors off of refrigerators and freezers. She described seeing water taking up a whole room where the freezer use to be, and what used to be the door of the freezer is now floating in the fetid waters. All the sacks of flour, ruined. All the delicate pastries, ruined. Their sitting area, their chairs, their coffee machines, their cash register, their storage area, all ruined. They have no idea when their bakery can open again.

And by the way, this is their third natural disaster. They had a flood in 2008 with Hurricane Ike.

And by the way, she said that flood insurance, at most, reimburses the owner of the flooded property up to 1 million dollars, which will not begin to cover the damage done to their business.

One last thing. Their bakery is in the heart of Jewish Houston. Jewish Houston happens to be right near the biggest flooding bayou, which means that all of the institutions in that Jewish neighborhood are ruined. The Orthodox shul. Flooded. The Conservative shul. Flooded. The Reform shul. Flooded. She had once taken me on a tour of the Conservative shul, Congregation Beth Yeshurun, which happens to be the biggest Conservative shul in America. Their Shabbat prayer books, High Holiday machzorim, Eitz Hayim Humashim, and all pews were all flooded under 8 feet of water. Their building is not usable and needs repair that will also cost far more than insurance covers. She is a member of that synagogue. I asked where High Holiday services

will be held in just a couple of weeks. She paused, and then observed, we are so overwhelmed that we have not gotten that far.

And yet, despite this adversity, there was an undeniable energy, even buoyancy, to her voice. I asked her where that buoyancy came from, and she said: Number one, nobody at our bakery died. If an employee had been in the basement when the water rolled in, massively, furiously, suddenly, they would have drowned, there was no way out. But thank God nobody was there. It was property damage, not life. She spent two days preparing an application for FEMA aid. She spent 5 and a half hours with a FEMA officer applying for aide. It is now out of her hands. Finally, her own home was dry. Her business was ruined, but she could go home at night, and for that she was truly grateful.

So much pain. So much loss. So much unsettledness, in her business and in her community. And yet, she possesses some preternatural equanimity. I was astounded by that equanimity. Here was a buoyant baker in the midst of a flooded bakery. How does that work? Had I been in her shoes, I think I might well have been freaked out. But she was not freaked out in the flood. She was buoyant in the flood.

That question caused me to reread an article by a writer named Courtney Martin evocatively entitled: "*The Reductive Seduction of Other People's Problems.*" Courtney Martin argues that we can never really understand another society's problems until and unless we live there and become a part of that world. The context for her piece is that she addresses young college graduates who dream of repairing the world. Often such idealistic social entrepreneurs are drawn to exotic problems in exotic places where they do not live. You are a 20 something in America, and you dream of solving Africa's drought problem. Sitting at home in America, you think you can figure out how to provide ready water for this parched continent. But it is not as

easy as it might appear from afar. For example, American foundations spent *16.4 million dollars* for PlayPump, a fun merry-go-round pump that was to produce safe drinking waters. The idea was seductive. Little children in Africa could play on the merry go round, and their play would generate water. But it turns out that the pumps broke very easily, and that children would have to play for 27 hours a day to produce the water that PlayPump promised.

Similarly, Martin observed that a young idealist in Africa, catching news of another gun-related fatality in America—Newtown, San Bernardino, Dallas, Orlando—might naively think: I am going to move to America and help America solve its gun problem. This is reductive seduction too, because the idealistic African does not get American gun culture and the logjam that is our legislative process.

When the problems are somebody else's, they are easy to solve. When the problems are your own, you get the complexity, and they are not so easy to solve.

The point of Courtney Martin's piece is that idealistic Americans would be better served focusing on problems back home, like the hungry and homeless a mile or two from your home. Less exotic. Less sexy. But you better understand and can do more to solve your own problems. The point of her piece is also radical humility. We cannot understand another person's world.

Not living in Houston, not being a baker, not having come through an epic flood, there was no way I could possibly predict or understand the buoyant baker in the flooded bakery.

Now why do I tell you all of this now? It all goes directly to the core of the High Holidays, but first a story.

Last weekend I was officiating at the wedding of a Boston bride and a British groom. There were a large number of guests from Wales, and they asked me to tell them about American Judaism. I said that if I had to summarize the essential character of American Judaism that I

know and love in a single word, that word would be non-judgmental. I don't want to judge your Judaism. I don't want to judge your life. How you live. Who you vote for. Who you marry. What you eat. What you drink. What you do with your weekends. How often you pray, or do not pray. How often you come to shul, or do not come to shul. These are personal choices. People need to own their own lives and their own choices, and rabbis and synagogues ought not to judge.

I told them we have a big tent. If you love or don't love services, come on in. If you keep kosher or don't, come on in. If you are LGBTQ or straight, come on in. If you are newly married or divorced, widowed or never married, come on in. If you are in an interfaith marriage, or married to a Jew, come on in. Whatever your politics, on America, on Israel, come on in. Our work is not to judge, but to love you for who you are.

Their eyes bugged out and their mouths were ajar. They looked truly stunned. They responded that that is *not* how Judaism is practiced in their community in Wales where Rabbis and shuls *are* judgmental. Several of them shared that their children were gay, or were dating or married to a non-Jew, or were lifelong bachelors, and those adult children, and their parents, felt judged and like they lived on the margins.

As I listened to their feedback, at how surprised they were that all were welcome in our tent when all were not as welcome in their tent, I had to admit that this non-judgmental posture represents a clear break with the religion of Moses that we read throughout Deuteronomy. Their judgmental rabbis are clearly more consistent with Moses, who is very comfortable saying "must." You must not marry a Canaanite. You must destroy Canaanite places of worship. You must observe God's laws. You will be graded on how well you observe God's laws.

For a long time now, I have known that Moses' proclivity to say must and to judge were foreign to how we live Judaism. It does not work here. Non-judgmentalism is our first principle. It is not even on Moses' list. Indeed, Moses says exactly the opposite: *hocheach tocheach et amatecha*, you shall surely judge your neighbor. I lived with the tension, but I knew I was missing a principled defense of our non-judgmentalism. In the wake of Houston, in the wake of the buoyant baker in the flooded bakery, I now have found my principled defense.

I cannot judge you because I am not living your life, and therefore I cannot possibly understand why you think what you think, why you feel what you feel, why you do what you do. We live in an age of toxic division. We disagree about American politics. We disagree about Israeli politics. On any and every morning of the week, there will be a news story where people will feel passionately in opposite directions.

My trying to figure out your politics or your religious practice has the likelihood of success of the American who thinks they can figure out Africa's drought. At best, on a good day, we can maybe understand ourselves.

Accepting and loving people for who they are, and not judging them for who they are not, works. More than that, it is right and moral. It is, in fact, the very first principle in the Torah, namely, that God created all human beings *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. We are all different from one another, yet all of us are stamped in God's image. The one who accepts and loves us for who we are is God.

In this month of Elul before the High Holidays, what is our concern? *Our* own choices. How *we* live. Our neighbor's choices, from how they voted to who they married, is literally none of our business. The human soul is just so complex. Let's focus on our own.

If there be one universal standard, beyond non-judgmentalism, it is that when Three

Brothers Bakery opens again, buy their pecan pie. You will love it! Shabbat shalom.