

# *Chaver Up!*

*49 Rabbis Explore  
What it Means to be  
an Ally through a  
Jewish Lens*

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(Editors)

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**Beit  
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committed to creating a whole new paradigm where there were no masters and slaves, no haves and have-nots and all lives truly mattered. We ate the matzah, the bread with no ego, to leave space for us to leave attachments behind and move forward with humility. We counted each day of the Omer, praying that the simple barley would keep us humble, keep us from falling back on the familiar structures that oppressed us and look forward to a whole new way of relating when truth is told with loving kindness, and justice and peace kiss (Ps. 85:11). And then, on the fiftieth day, when we reach the mountaintop, we become One, and we are able to eat that holy challah without getting puffed up ourselves and leave room to love the stranger until there is no other and from being trusted allies we remember that we are family.

## *Tzimtzum:* Allyship as Humility

Rabbi Dan Ornstein

The Zoom room fills up quickly with a color diversity more pronounced than at any time in my synagogue's history. We're here to confront the bleeding wound caused by this knife-point moment in American history. We're coming to understand that progress's paper band aid has been ripped off, revealing the deep puncture of America's slave legacy that has never healed.

We crowd in on the screen with Black activists, Jews of color, people who struggle to live with, and within, the intersecting cultural bequests of race, Jewish history and religion. Among the panelists, two stand out, now-long-time members of my congregation with whom I've traveled complicated journeys into Jewish life and family. They'll both speak tonight about their experiences with racism and caste as Jews of color. I'm rightly proud of them, and I'm rightly proud of the role I've played in their lives.

Pride is a trickster. You nurse it unreflectively enough and it grows tentacles of smugness that lash you to wherever you're standing. In its grasp, you think you're moving upward, when all you're really doing is chasing your tail. This smugness is mine that night, but I don't acknowledge it just then. I politely feign attentiveness to speaker after speaker, but I'm above it all. I'm a good

seventies/eighties Jewish liberal from a highly integrated Queens neighborhood, whose civil rights activist parents moved there to make sure my siblings and I learned to live respectfully with others in the world. Over a quarter of a century, I've had a hand in shaping a shul that doesn't talk diversity because we live it... (maybe). My wife and I are part of a racism study group, working hard at identifying and slowly leeching from our bones America's racist poison. I already know all of this racism stuff. Why really listen?

One of my former congregants begins to speak. She tells a story about walking out of our sanctuary during Shabbat services five years ago. She was accosted by another member, a self-appointed gatekeeper who politely feigned friendliness to check out who she was and what she was doing there. With no overt anger, but with the sadness of hurtful memory, she reflects upon that moment:

"I remember thinking to myself, 'Is this a racist synagogue? Why do I want to be here?'"

Now I'm listening...And I'm embarrassed...And I'm fuming.

Never mind that she's only being honest about her early experiences in White-Jewish America.

Never mind that she never says to the group, "Rabbi Ornstein and his synagogue are so racist!"

Never mind that she and her family are very happy members at that moment, five years later.

I'm listening and embarrassed and fuming:

"What? After all I have personally done...after all we have personally done for you...We're the

embodiment of the old legend that all, A-L-L Jews, past, present, future, stood at Mount Sinai when the Torah was given....How could you...."

She finishes her monologue, then my second congregant speaks. He's another happy Jewish camper, another satisfied customer of Rabbi and Company, yet much more circumspect about his experiences. That circumspection drives me nuts. He declines to tell the group about what happened a year earlier when, as I led Friday night services in our chapel, one of our building staff gatekept him with a pleasant smile at the lobby doors. I only found out about this after worship was done, when both men, now chatting in genuinely friendly tones, joked about their "misunderstanding" out in the lobby. A misunderstanding that, turning on the wrong word or a misinterpreted gesture, could have become fatal.

It's what my congregant doesn't say which once again makes me embarrassed, makes me fume, makes me despondent that I, that we, didn't catch these encounters, didn't save these two of our fellow Jews from such "friendly welcoming."

I think, "With friendliness like this, who needs...."

"Who needs to rethink this monologue in your head?" I suddenly think to myself.

My two congregants' stories, the shared and the unshared, aren't about me, my reputation, and the outside spaces we occupy.

They aren't about my leadership or my anything.

They aren't about our shul, good, bad, or racist. They aren't even necessarily about how racist or anti-racist our sacred communal spaces are generally.

They're about my two congregants' struggles to allow Jewish identity and belonging to get under their skins, as they struggle every day to live in their skins without suffering harassment or hatred.

Now I'm actually listening. I've made a tiny space in my head, in my heart, in my piece of White polite society. For a tiny moment, I struggle toward the simple awareness necessary to step away and step back, so they can occupy the space they need, they deserve, to which they have an unconditional right.

The great Jewish mystic, Isaac Luria, wondered about the "back story" of creation found in the Book of Genesis. How could G-d, Who is everywhere, allow for the creation of the physical world which, by definition, is not G-d? He taught that G-d created the world through *tzimtzum*: self-contraction.

Prior to Creation, there was only the infinite creative light of G-d filling all existence. When it arose in G-d's Will to create worlds and emanate the emanated ... G-d contracted (in Hebrew "*tzimtzum*") G-d's self in the point at the center...so that there remained a void, a hollow empty space, away from the central point ... After this *tzimtzum* ... G-d drew down from the infinite creative light a single straight line... and it chained down, descending into

that void. ... In the space of that void, G-d...made all the worlds. (— Etz Chaim, Arizal, Heichal A"K, anaf 2. Translation by chabad.org with modifications by Dan Ornstein).

One explanation of this complicated teaching is this. Before space and time and creation, there was nothing but G-d, so nothing besides G-d could exist. To give the world "breathing room" to become and to grow, G-d self-contracted just enough to leave a space into which G-d, as it were, injected a thin ray of infinitely creative light. Out of that holy light, that creative energy, the universe was born.

I'm most certainly not G-d. At times, I occupy too much space, so that I forget what it means to truly be myself. But right then, that night, not as a rabbi, not as a leader, but as my friends' fellow traveler, I'm learning to imitate G-d by engaging in my own *tzimtzum*, so their narratives, their truths can grow. I'm learning that being their ally requires, first of all things, finding the self-contracting humility to get out of their way.