

What we're doing: instigated questions and provoked answers.

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A newsletter.



E pluribus unum

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

In the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece, "[Rashomon](#)," four characters recount their subjective (and in many respects contradictory) versions of the same brief incident. Like a cubist painting—in which the two-dimensional canvas attempts to convey the four dimensions of lived experience—their stories add layers of meaning and perspective to a single event. By the end of the film, the viewer comes to appreciate the fallacy of objectivity and to recognize that to approach a full understanding of any event or experience requires the weaving together of multiple subjective narratives.

Jewish tradition is rife with stories that evoke this Rashomon-like perspective-splintering:

In the Talmud (Yoma 75a) we read that "every time the Jewish people ate *manna*, they found in it many different flavors, based on their preferences." In my childhood home, this was echoed by my father's claim that, if we closed our eyes and concentrated when we ate the *afikomen*, it would taste like whatever we wanted (despite years of trying, I've never ended the *seder* with a mouthful of chocolate malted milkshake).

In the midrashic collection *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, we learn that when God spoke to the Israelites at Sinai, each heard the voice she or he needed to hear:

Said R. Levi: God appeared to them like a statue which looks in every direction. A thousand people look at it, and it looks at each of them. Thus when God spoke to Israel, each Jew said: "It is to me that the voice is speaking." "I am Adonai your God"—[with 'your'] in the singular, not the plural. The Divine Word spoke to each and every person according to her particular capacity.

In the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5), we read that every human being is modeled after Adam, and yet each is unique, a mystery whose paradoxical quality testifies to God's greatness: "A human strikes many coins from the same die, and all the coins are alike. But the Sovereign, the Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Holy One strikes every human from the die of the First Human, and yet no human is quite like another."

Even the cornerstone Jewish belief in God as a singular and unitary One opens itself up to multi-faceted interpretation. In the first section of the *Amidah*—the centerpiece of the traditional prayer service—we read "Blessed are You, Adonai, our God and God of our ancestors, God of Abraham and Sarah, God of Isaac and Rebecca, and God of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel..." It's a peculiarly uneconomical phrasing, given that one could seemingly get away with "God of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, etc." Rav Ezra Bick writes of this idiosyncrasy:

The concept of multiple Avot implies that the religious and spiritual personality of each father was uniquely different, and consequently, his relationship with HIS God was unique. If in prayer we have three fathers, then we are saying that there is no one single paradigm of a relationship with God. Isaac prayed to the God of his father, Abraham, and yet, he instituted his own prayer, at a different time and a different mood... If we are to be true followers of the Avot, then we have to pray as they did, including finding the God of the individual as they did.

So what do we make of this tradition of fragmenting homogeneous phenomena into subjective, heterogeneous experiences? The lesson I would draw—during this week of celebration of American independence, and in this era of growing disparagement of others whose identities and perspectives differ from ours—is a modest *hiddush* on our national motto *e pluribus unum*, "from many, one." Our national motto encourages us to take the many, those who come from different countries, speak different languages, have different religions—and

make them one, homogeneous. The Jewish texts cited above offer a different perspective: While we may share similar experiences—reading the same newspapers, tasting the same food, even sharing the same God—we experience and understand them differently. If we're really honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge that each of us can only feel [one part of the elephant](#). In fact, it's disingenuous to suggest otherwise, to suggest that all of us are—or should be—the same. (We have learned this lesson many times in America.) The whole really is greater than the sum of its parts. In America, out of the many, one. In Jewish tradition, out of the one, many. And we are stronger for it.

Best,
Aaron



Love is complicated.

[Sh'ma Now](#) looks at AHAVA - LOVE.

This issue begins to untangle some of the distinctive ways we love in Judaism — loving God, loving others, loving the stranger, loving the Jewish people (*ahavat ha'am*), and loving Israel (*ahavat Yisrael*).

GIVING

Back in September we shared with you [The Uncertain Road: Story of a Collaboration – Part 1](#), which was a reflection on the in-process collaboration between the Jewish Social Justice Roundtable and Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, as we took on the idea of a project together, to strengthen the application of Jewish wisdom in the Jewish social justice sector. That early process resulted in a planning grant, which has now led to [a two-year grant that will launch new anti-discrimination trainings](#), dramatically enhancing the JSJR's ability to support and amplify racial

justice efforts.

We look forward to sharing further our thoughts on the process, which illuminated some of the challenges inherent in our involvement as both funder and thought partner. However, beyond the high quality learning from the ways this relationship has unfolded, we are unequivocally proud of the resulting proposal and our support for this critical work by the JSJR.

In the words of JSJR Director Abby Levine: "When we think about our community's work for racial justice and civil rights, many Jews think of the iconic photo of Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Dr. Martin Luther King in Selma in 1965. Some of our modern day Jewish activists may look like Heschel – and many others reflect the wide spectrum of race, ethnicity, and gender identities within the Jewish community. We have work to do as a Jewish community to support the work and amplify the voices of Jews of color. We are thrilled that this Roundtable effort will provide trainings to Jewish social justice organizations to do that – making us stronger partners in the work for racial justice and civil rights."



Take our webinar series with you this summer

Stream recordings of the first two webinars in our series of learning opportunities with winners of the 2016 Lippman Kanfer Prize for Applied Jewish Wisdom.

Dr. Melanie Landau of Encounter

[Retrieving the Hidden Gifts of Conflict](#)

Rabbi Zelig Golden

[Cultural Mentoring: the Hebrew Calendar as Judaism's Natural Operating System.](#)

LEARNING

Last December, Hillel's Meyerhoff Center released a [comprehensive curriculum](#), enabling any Hillel professional to tap into Jewish wisdom to address some of the biggest issues facing emerging adults. Designed with college students' lives in mind, the curriculum uses Jewish sensibilities as gateways to meaning and relevance of Jewish teachings. As Hillel's website describes:

“We think these Sensibilities have a lot to say to us. They can help us resist distorted images about our bodies (*Tzelem Elohim*), put down our cell phones and focus on what's important (*Shabbat*), and argue productively (*Elu v'Elu*). They can help us deal with failure (*Shevirah*), celebrate with responsibility (*Simcha*) and take the next step (*Na'aseh v'Nishmah*). They guide us when we try to figure out who we really are (*Teshuvah*), what we owe to others (*Brit*), how to lead (*Yisrael*), and how to dare greatly (*Lech Lecha*).”

For each sensibility, the curriculum offers foundational texts, ways to approach them and experiential activities to get to the heart of their messages.

Meyerhoff has generously posted this resource online – both the entire curriculum and individual pdfs for each sensibility – for anyone to use to bring sensibilities to life. How might YOU adapt this resource to use with your board, your book group, your kids? Try it out, and [let them know what you learn from it](#) (meyerhoffcenter@hillel.org). They would love to hear feedback!



In the Mishna, Hillel teaches us, “When no one else is acting, act.” We stand together, united in our commitment to a sustainable future.

We are proud to have joined with colleagues and partners throughout the American Jewish Community as signators to [an open letter in support of the Paris Climate Accord.](#)

Read more about this advocacy [here](#), and we invite you to [add your name](#).

SHARING

If you enjoyed our webinar with Zelig Golden on the practical and profound uses of the Jewish calendar in pedagogy and organizational development, [sign up for the Wilderness Torah Training Institute.](#)

Mayyim Hayyim has just released a thorough [curriculum for post-conversion Jews](#), to help clergy, educators, and lay leaders work with newly Jewish individuals (and their partners) deepen their understanding of Jewish life, ritual, and practice within a supportive community of their peers.

We enjoyed [this reflection on the power of relationships](#) from Pedagogy of Partnership.

The work of the Clergy Leadership Incubator program has yielded [some great learnings from experimentation.](#)

A great reminder/primer for philanthropists and grant seekers alike - make sure you know the [difference between collaboration and collective impact.](#)

What else should we be sharing?

[*Click here to send us your recommendations!*](#)



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