

“The Power of Threes”

Reflection by Alex Matthews

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I want to begin by thanking you Reverend Rebecca, and the entire Congregation, for welcoming me in to your worship today. Last time I was here at this pulpit was in March of 2020, and it is so nice to be back, and especially heartening to see so many smiling faces and hear your voices ring out in this beautiful building.

רַבֵּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַדִּין וְעַל

הָאֱמֶת וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel used to say: on three things does the world stand: On justice, on truth, and on peace. In just a few minutes, we'll be lucky enough to hear the Choir sing these words, which come from the book of Pirkei Avot, known as ethics of our fathers or wisdom of our ancestors in English. This book is part of the Mishnah, the ancient Jewish law code compiled about two thousand years ago, and it is traditionally studied by Jewish communities, chapter by chapter, in the weeks after Passover. One of the things that is distinct about Pirkei Avot as part of the Mishnah is that it isn't concerned with Jewish law at all, rather it's a compilation of ethics, moral maxims, and Rabbinic wisdom that give us a window into how the ancient Jewish sages believed we should live moral and ethical lives.

I have to admit, even though I was familiar with the passage, when Justin first suggested this song, I had to review the words closely. I found myself a bit incredulous. Were these really THE three things

that my tradition wanted to establish as the foundation for all of human existence—Justice, Truth, and Peace? Don't get me wrong—I recognize the tremendous importance of justice, truth or peace! But for a book of Jewish wisdom, aimed at Jewish readers, I was expecting a more uniquely Jewish take. Where is Torah in this list? Does the Jewish world not stand on believing in only Adonai, our God? What about observing Shabbat, or any of the other countless unique Jewish practices that feel foundational to Jewish life?

It turns out that there is another, very similar teaching earlier in this chapter of Prikei Avot that addresses these questions. A different Rabbi, Simeon the Righteous, ALSO teaches that the world stands upon three things. In fact, he uses the exact same wording: “the world stands upon three things: the Torah, the Temple service, and acts of lovingkindness.” THAT felt more like it to me...

Much of ancient Rabbinic literature is famous for its disputes—two Rabbis diving into the minutia of text in order to come to a definitive ruling on Jewish law or practice. In these situations, the desired outcome is only one right answer. So, there is a temptation to read these texts as two opposing hot takes—the world can ONLY stand on three things, which Rabbi identified the correct three? Yet, despite that, I'm confident that these Rabbis aren't disagreeing, and their messages certainly should not be mutually exclusive. Rather, **we** are left to determine how these two teachings coexist.

I believe these two ancient Rabbis were in fact in conversation with each other. They were exploring the interplay between the universal and the particular. They both wanted the Jewish people to be deeply committed to Jewish thought and practice, which were

epitomized by Torah study and, at the time, Temple Service, and to use those tools, along with acts of lovingkindness, as the building blocks for Jewish society. **And**, they also recognized that Jewish culture and society never have and never will exist in a vacuum. And so, were a non-Jewish neighbor to ask what this Judaism thing is all about, the answer would hopefully be, “we believe in the pursuit of Justice, Truth and Peace. We manifest that through Torah, Temple Service and acts of Lovingkindness—what is your strategy?”

I’ve been thinking a lot recently about the intersection of the particular and the universal in our different religious practices because of another unique set of three that occurred recently. Two weeks ago, the holidays of Passover, Easter and Ramadan all coincided, something that occurs only once every thirty years or so. Leading up to that weekend, I kept seeing the same notion repeated in the news—tensions were expected to rise in Jerusalem as the occasion of these holidays overlapping increased the specter of violence. I couldn’t, and still can’t, wrap my head around it. How is it that in a place infused with so much holiness, at a time of year so sacred to so many, that this confluence could lead to conflict rather than observance and celebration?

I don’t have an answer for that one. I really wish I did. But I want to share the words of Rabbi Jonah of Jeronah, a 12th Century Catalan scholar who wrote a commentary on Pirkei Avot. He writes simply and succinctly that, “peace includes all good things in the world, and there is no end to its benefits.” Those limitless benefits are too often inaccessible when we allow the differences in our beliefs to overshadow our commonalities. So much of the beauty of our religious practices stems from their diversity; from our own take on what it

means to be human, or to live in relationship with the Divine. If we are able to build a foundation on the three—or thirty—values we know we share—justice, truth, peace, love, generosity...so many others—perhaps from there we can learn how to make the world stand amidst all of our uniqueness and our differences as well.