

Thu, May 17, 2018, 5:00 PM

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My Bronfman 'Sinai Experience' Inspired a Day of Unity for Texas Teens

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Roaring thunder, overwhelming lightning, and engulfing clouds preceded the voice of God as He descended upon Mount Sinai, or so we shall read over Shavuot. In this moment, the People of Israel are regarded as “*B’Lev Echad*,” “With One Heart.” The shared awesome experience of Sinai allowed for the Jewish people to achieve unity. The petty strife between tribes and factions ceased; Jew recognized Jew as similarly committed to a noble end.

Over Bronfman, I, too, had a “Sinai Experience.” While mine may have carried less natural wonder and fanfare, it did carry the same result. Over the summer, I was able to have conversation - an informal exchange of ideas - about otherwise toxic topics. This is, too often, unachievable in the highly charged environments in which we live. Instead of conversation, we find debate: a myopic defense of ideas.

Following the summer, I asked myself, why? What contributed to our depolarized culture?

My answer lies at Sinai. We, the Bronfmanim, had shared experiences that enabled us to get to know each other as friends before we moved to contentious issues. As a result, we were able to put person before politics. We were able to recognize each other as good-willed beings. In short, we achieved pluralism. As Isaiah Berlin defined it, we unconsciously recognized that “there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other.”

At Sinai, the People of Israel were not silent. They declared “*Naaseh V’Nishma*,” literally “We will do and we will listen.” To me, this is the Torah cautioning against complacency in the face of a revelation. The Torah teaching listening is not enough; we must act upon our learnings and values. I took the message to heart following Bronfman: realizing how polarized my Houston community was, I appreciated the need to share my lesson.

As Chairman of High School Republicans of Texas, I reached out to my Democratic counterpart to initiate a “Day of Unity.” Joining as the largest youth political organizations in the state, we held a convention of 300 students to combat political polarization and promote dialogue. Our event was graced with speakers ranging from Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner, to Senator Ted Cruz, to U.S. Representative Joaquin Castro. Additionally, we held the first conversation ever between the Chairmen of the Republican and Democratic Parties of Texas.

Student participants were also broken up into breakout sessions where they participated in more intimate and engaging learning activities - some even in the “hevruta” model - led by Heterodox Academy’s Raffi Grinberg, Anti-Defamation League Regional Director Dayan Gross, and other experts in the field. Day of Unity will continue on beyond our one event: we are partnering with the Houston Independent School District to implement anti-polarization programming in schools and have begun a trend of “Day of Unity” conventions across the nation.

The lessons that I advocated at Day of Unity are ones deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. They are the lessons taught at Sinai by our religious ancestors. As Shavuot comes around, I hope that we can all find a “Sinai Moment” and stand together “*B’Lev Echad*,” recognizing those who sit on the other side as committed to a noble end.

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