

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, we begin our discussion about religious diversity and differences around the holidays.

Tim Dentry:

Welcome to Tim Talk. I'm Tim Dentry, President and CEO of Northern Light Health. I welcome you to join me for a frank discussion about racial, social, and medical justice. Our goal is to create a collective understanding of the issues that exist and find a better path forward. As we approach the end of year holidays, many of us have our own cultural and religious traditions that we embrace. Here in Maine, the Christian faith and other religions such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, among others, are present in our communities and our workplaces. This is why discussing religious diversity ensures we are listening to and learning from others in ways that will make us a more inclusive healthcare community and more tuned in individually. Joining me now as Rabbi Darah Lerner from Congregation Beth El in Bangor, a reformed Jewish congregation. Rabbi, thank you for being here today.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

Thank you for having me. This is such an important series of conversations that you're having, and my community is very deeply engaged in healthcare at Northern Lights and other places so thank you.

Tim Dentry:

Wonderful, thank you. So Rabbi Lerner first of all, would you please outline the Jewish faith's traditions of the holiday season coming up? What many of us term the holiday season coming up, and the relative importance of Hanukkah and the calendar of holy days in Judaism.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

So to Jewish years you say the expression holiday season and we actually think September, October, when the major Jewish holidays take place. We of course know that the holiday season we talk about now is December, Hanukkah, Christmas, and many others. Hanukkah on the Jewish calendar is actually technically a minor holiday. While it is a great family holiday, fun gifts, from a religious perspective it's minor. Its story is important. It is a story of a band of Maccabees who liberated Judaism historically, and then our tradition turned it into a celebration of the divine in history, through the miracle of oil, and lighting a lamp, and the importance of light in a time of darkness. But the major Jewish holidays really as you asked what's the significance of Hanukkah, the major holidays were back in September, October with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Hanukkah gets a lot of, if you'll excuse the expression, street cred because it's so close to Christmas and we like the festive joining of light and celebration in December.

Tim Dentry:

Wonderful, thank you so much. And now as I reflect on the racial, social, and medical justice dialogue that we are engaging in Northern Light through these podcasts and given this challenging time in our country with COVID and other issues that can be divisive across our country, I wonder what would be an important message or lesson learned from the Jewish faith which would help the caregivers of Northern Light Health at this moment of time. And I'm thinking of last week when you and I spoke and you shared a perspective, a very personal perspective of women of valor was how I wrote that down. And I wonder if you would share that with our listeners in the context of facing tough times while standing up for what is just.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

Well, thanks for such a wonderful question. All of Jewish history in a sense can be seen almost as a training for this difficult moment in time. Whether it's questions of COVID, whether it's about finding justice in our world, whether that's racial justice, social justice, gender equality, et cetera, Judaism's been a training ground and what I mean by that is Judaism is an ethical monotheism, which means singular God, but engaged in doing good on a daily basis. And so every time there's a disruption in Jewish history of which unfortunately there's been a lot, the story of the Maccabees we just talked about a moment ago briefly, was an oppressor that overcame by the Maccabees as warriors. And then its adjacent story of the oil is a story of human small miraculous experience. Find a small vial of oil, you make the very human intentioned act of trying to light it in spite of it not being enough.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

And that's the power of Jewish storytelling. And this holiday is that you have a little tiny vial of oil, who's going to light it if you need eat it to last eight days, which it's supposed to have needed to be. You don't light it when you only have one day, but the resilience is to go ahead and do it anyway, to try it, to work through it. So, Jewish history is full of these stories of major destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, disrupting all of Jewish history. We lost our ability to pray as we used to, and along came a group that says no we have a new way of doing it. We take old ideas, old values, our connection to God and each other, and recreate it, including in our home. Which leads me to your comment about what we talked about a woman of valor.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

That's part of Proverbs and it's said on a Friday night. And it's conventionally understood as sort of a nice blessing over a woman on a Friday night. But what I always like to hear in that woman of valor is that it's Eishet Chayil. Woman Chayil valor, which we do think of as little strong, but in Hebrew is actually the same root as for somebody who soldiers on. Who's got fortitude and power in the world. And so while on the one hand it seems nice, it's a pleasant series of things we say about a woman on a Friday night. It's also about again these really important themes right now of resilience, engaging in the world, power of home and family. So Judaism has all of these different ways it reinforces the same idea.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

So in this moment of COVID, in this moment of dealing with social justice, Judaism says there are ethical ways to be and that we have the capacity by doing acts to make the world better. And the last little teaching I'll give you in this question is we call that big idea tikkun olam, the obligation to repair the world. And that too is what all of these Jewish acts are about. As a little PS that's part of why people... so many people go into healthcare and education and social justice activities in our Jewish community, because they're doing that repairing the world. And faith allows you to be resilient, gives you community as you go and do that work. Thanks for a great question.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you Rabbi Lerner and tikkun olam, I love that. And I think our listener, especially this time of COVID when everyone talks about different degrees and different ways in which COVID fatigue presents itself, but in healthcare it's like yeah, and now the biggest rush and biggest rise of cases and biggest demands on our medical delivery abilities are the highest now, as we're at our possibly our most challenge from a fatigue point of view. And more is to come as we are getting into the fall and the winter, so to soldier on and to speak of the resilience, and I love how you said so many things there,

thank you so much. You tied together resilience and engaging in the world, and that hopefully our listeners, especially those that are caregivers, that are part of the Northern Light family will really think of what does that mean to them of soldiering on, resilience and engaging in the world.

Tim Dentry:

So that's just one thing I wanted to let you know how that struck me very, very personally. I also love the humans small and miraculous experience. Those are the words that you said, that's really great. I send out a reflection every Friday to all of our colleagues, our 12,500 strong. And we talked about the true successes, and the true successes are those human small miraculous experiences of holding the hand of someone who's having trouble breathing, and seeing hope in someone's eyes when maybe a patient has turned the corners back on the path to wellness, those kinds of things. Those are the true miraculous experiences in life and we're trying to celebrate those, so was that was perfect.

Tim Dentry:

Also, taking old ideas and rewriting it or reweaving it into what we do, that just reminded me of some of my experience in healthcare. And it was in a Catholic healthcare system, and one of the very strong women of valor that I was a mentor of mine, Sister Helen [Amus 00:09:40] was her name and she started at the hospital where I'd been, where I was born, and where I started as a lab tech on weekends, and then became the chief operating officer. And when she replaced a real woman of valor, Sister Mary Thomas who was CEO there for 34 years, Sister Helen Amus I remember one of the first things that she said was the keys to our future lie in our past. So that's a variation on that theme I think of taking prior ideas and really refreshing them in the new way going forward. Again, thank you for those incredibly thoughtful messages and answers and words that you shared, and experience that you shared with us. I know you have questions you'd like to ask me.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

Yeah, I do and thanks again for inviting me. So I have two questions that are a little bit related, but one is a little more... a little smaller maybe question. So we've been talking about December and the upcoming holidays, but it's not just in December that we see a lot of seasonal decorations which are in fact actually religious to some degree. And they can sometimes make people feel left out by faith or whatever reason they may feel outside of the experience of those decorations because they don't reflect their lives. I was wondering how can you address the impact that it has on people who don't share those particular stories, narratives, decorations at Northern Light Health.

Tim Dentry:

Great question. I think the overarching answer is that I want to make sure that as the leader of Northern Light Health, I want to make sure I'm always reinforcing a culture of inclusiveness. That I'm always reinforcing a culture of [foreign language 00:11:41] celebrating differences of viewpoints, of backgrounds, of religious faith, of orientation, everything. To be more on the side of inclusivity as opposed to one is better, or one is more pronounced or what have you. So, that means a couple of things. It means bringing awareness to the forefront and bringing acknowledgement of the differences in people's traditions and lives, and with truly though... I think once doing that, you also identify a common set of values. So, I give you again a personal experience.

Tim Dentry:

So I was working and living in United Arab Emirates for six years just before I came here. And around Ramadan time, I thought well I'll make myself scarce. As a Christian I will allow them to do their celebrations. But no, every evening at sunset, after sunset is the Iftar, is the breaking of the fast... So many common threads, obviously between religions as well and they would invite me. Many of my Muslim friends would invite me to their daily Iftars. So probably four or five nights a week, I was doing that for the better part of a month. So they brought me into their celebrations and I learned so much and I learned about their culture, and I learned about their values, their family values, their total love for the higher power and what they do. And so it gave me just such a better, more informed sense that we're all in this together and it's an inclusive kind of thing for sure.

Tim Dentry:

And even on the celebrating Christmas side of things, I would get more Christmas gifts and more Christmas celebrations and cards. To this day, I still get them from my Muslim friends because they're helping me celebrate Christmas. So back to your question, I think that I would love to make sure that... and especially through this kind of podcast hopefully we're opening up some minds, that people will say, "Oh there are some our colleagues who are of the Jewish faith or are not celebrating Christmas the way that I do, I need to make sure that's okay." And we need to be open to that and bring individuals into our celebrations and acknowledge where there are differences and acknowledge if they choose not to be brought in our celebrations, that's fine too. I think sometimes in our society, it's one faction has more than the other and I just think that's a no win situation.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

Well, thank you. I do want to do a little shout out to you. One of the first time we ever met was a chaplaincy meeting and we were coming up on... we were having a discussion about the upcoming Hanukkah, et cetera and you made sure that there was a Hanukiah, which is the menorah for Hanukkah, available so that people in the building could see, reflect, et cetera on it. And I just want to shout out to that very personal moment of the first time you and I met in a meeting and you made a transformation happen instantaneously. There wasn't a lot of thought or analysis you just made it happen, and so thank you.

Tim Dentry:

Thank goodness for Amazon Prime, it was delivered before the meeting was over. Thanks for reminding me of that, that was fun.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

Yeah, but it was more important than the ability of Amazon was your go-to attitude and so thank you. So my next question's a little bit related but a little bit different. So living an engaged Jewish life is a year round commitment, it's about observances on holidays throughout the year but also it impacts every part of a person's life and that includes food choices, healthcare choices. So my sort of if you will bigger question is, how do you see being able to have an awareness and a support structure that makes Jewish staff, Jewish patients, visitors, et cetera, really on the radar, not just around holidays but this is sort of an... almost if you will an institutional question.

Tim Dentry:

Yeah, great question. And first of all again we're trying to raise awareness and openness, but I'll give you an example of where I think it's exactly what you're talking about has been done well and it's by our one

hospital, Mercy Hospital in Portland which has obviously had started in the prior pandemic of 1918 by the Sisters of Mercy and they came to Portland to take care of the sick then. But you know then decades later, there was a physician and his name was Dr. Harry Davis and he was of the Jewish faith. And the mercy sister said, "You can practice here." And as I understand the story, a lot of other places weren't open to him practicing in that region, the Southern part of Maine. Dr. Harry Davis not only did but he was beloved for decades and he was a leader among the medical staff, leader among the medical community in Portland and beyond.

Tim Dentry:

And right now there is a wing that has his name on the wing and there's a beautiful statue that is... and his family has supported the organization to this day and they made it possible that we could have the wing named after Dr. Davis and have a statue and a beautiful story to talk about that. And the story goes on that the sisters, there were a hundred or so that attended his funeral and they needed to get special approval all the way from the Vatican to go into the temple. And so there's more to that where those that are true storytellers and really know more about what I just said can paint a more beautiful story than what I just described.

Tim Dentry:

But to me that is a beautiful story and that's one way in which a faith-based hospital of Mercy, which is now part of Northern Light really celebrates Dr. Davis who was of the Jewish faith. And we make sure that in the mission components of all of our hospitals, that Mercy does the best job of that and I think we're absolutely getting there at our largest hospital, Eastern Maine Medical Center.

Tim Dentry:

I think now they is so much more of a true investment into religious diversity and acknowledging differences and making it a bringing together as opposed to one separate from the other. So I think we have ways to go, we should never feel like we've got this down, we can check off a box. There's still more we can do but I like the way we're heading with this at EMMC and to build off of the traditions that Mercy has brought.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

Well, thank you. And I encourage you and I also invite future conversations to allow for ways that we can support the work that you're doing. Because again not just Judaism but faith traditions are often long fingers into a person's life about as I mentioned everything from what people eat, to how they make their medical and ethical choices, all of that impacts their healthcare as a patient but also faculty and staff, patients, administrators, et cetera, so thank you.

Tim Dentry:

Terrific, thank you. And so that will wrap up this episode of Tim Talk. Thank you Rabbi Lerner for your insights.

Rabbi Darah Lerner:

Thanks for having me and I really appreciate this time and good luck going forward.

Tim Dentry:

This transcript was exported on Apr 11, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

And thank you to our listeners. Until next time, I'm Tim Dentry encouraging you to listen and to promote our culture of caring, diversity and inclusion, caring for one another. Thank you.

Announcer:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. If you enjoyed this podcast and would like to learn more about this subject, you can find additional information at northernlighthealth.org/podcast. We welcome you to join us for our next podcast on December 3rd, when we will continue our discussion on religious diversity with Melissa Skahan, Vice President of Mission Integration at Northern Light Mercy Hospital.