**“The Jewish Way to Disagree”**

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**A young rabbi who had just graduated from a Rabbinic seminary in New York got a position at a small congregation in the suburbs. But at his first Sabbath service there, a strange thing happened: when the Shema prayer was said, half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting.**

The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand up…

The rabbi, educated as he was in the Law and commentaries, didn’t know what to do. His congregation suggested that he consult a housebound 98 year old man, who was one of the original founders of their temple. The rabbi hoped the elderly man would be able to tell him what the actual temple tradition was. So he went to the nursing home with a representative of each faction of the congregation.

The one whose followers stood during Shema said to the old man, “Is the tradition to stand during this prayer?”

The old man answered, “No, that is not the tradition.”

The one whose followers sat asked, “Is the tradition to sit during Shema?”

The old man answered, “No, that is not the tradition.”

“But”, the rabbi said to the old man, “The congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether to sit or to stand…..”

The old man interrupted, exclaiming….”THAT is the tradition!”

Jews are known for being argumentative. We have a history of internal disputes. Our disagreements go back over two thousand years, whether it was the Sadducees vs. the Pharisees, the Karaites vs. the Rabbis, or the Orthodox vs. Reform. Today we are still arguing: over the role of women, who is a Jew, the Mideast, on and on. In our local communities, we may disagree about policies and rituals, personnel and volunteers. Being human means having a unique perspective that is different from other people, and unless we live in a totalitarian society, disagreement is inevitable. But disagreement can be healthy or destructive.

Jewish tradition, as embodied in the magnum opus of the Sages, the Bablyonian Talmud, emphasizes that arguments can be healthy. As Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson points out, there are 5,000 arguments in Talmud, but only fifty are resolved. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the modern Israeli Rabbinic genius who translated the Talmud from Aramaic to Modern Hebrew (and with his staff to English and other languages) said that we should be focusing on teaching the Talmud rather than the Bible. According to Steinsaltz, studying the Bible “makes you feel like a little prophet,” thinking that you have the one correct divine message, while studying the Talmud makes you think like a rabbi, knowing that the divine will is up to God but we must honor different opinions, then settle our disputes by reasoned argument and majority rule.

The Jewish oral tradition is all about the debates, not final answers. It is about searching for the truth, but knowing that there is not one final truth. The Hebrew word for truth, *Emet,* has three letters, aleph, mem and tav, which are the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew aleph-bet. To me, that hints that there is my truth, and your truth, but the whole truth is very broad and encompasses perspectives “from A-Z.”

In recent years we have seen an increased polarization in our political climate in the United States, as well as an increasing gap, and sometimes acrimony, between Jews who are more traditional and Orthodox and those who are more secular and liberal. I think that this is because the pace of change has become very fast, upsetting those who are guardians of the traditional and conservative ways of life and exacerbated by our uncertain economic and environmental milieu. There is nothing new or destructive about disagreements per se. It is the way that we conduct them that can make them healthy paths to growth or hurtful and destructive verbal wars.

Jewish tradition can offer us important guidelines on how to disagree. There are three I would like to share here:

Making our disagreements “for the sake of heaven,” knowing the power of words, and putting a priority on listening to one another.

For the first lesson, “the sake of heaven,” we look to the Mishnah, the earliest compilation of Rabbinic spoken Torah. Our Sages were concerned that our disagreements be for God’s sake, or you could say exemplifying our highest values. In Pirke Avot, the Chapters of the Founders, we find the following famous passage:

Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven will ultimately endure, and one which is not for the sake of Heaven will not ultimately endure. What is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? This is a debate between Hillel and Shammai. What is a dispute not for the sake of Heaven? This is the dispute of Korach and his assembly."

Let’s look at these two opposing examples, chosen by our Sages. Korach shows up in the Torah, Numbers 16 as a demagogue who appears to challenges the “unfair” authority of Moses, but who is actually motivated by his own jealousy and hunger for power. His disagreement with Moses takes an ugly turn and his end is dramatic: he and his followers are all swallowed up by the earth. (Perhaps some of us have harbored fantasies that our favorite opponents could make a similar hasty exit, if a less violent one.)

On the other hand, Hillel and Shammai, represent the right way to disagree, “for the sake of heaven.” It is written in the Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b:

**R.** Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel, the former asserting, ‘The halachah (Jewish Law) is in agreement with our views’ and the latter contending, ‘The halachah is in agreement with our views’. Then a heavenly voice announced: **“These and these are [both] the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of School of Hillel.’** Since, however, both are the words of the living God’ what was it that entitled School of Hillel to have the halachah fixed in agreement with their rulings? **Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of the house of Shammai, and were even so [humble] as to mention the actions of the School of Shammai before theirs.”**

So we see the Rabbinic idea of a dispute “for the sake of heaven,” is one that is done to find truth, to support our highest values, untainted by ulterior motives or personal advancement. It is arguing with respect and humility. In this sense, I think that we are halfway there. A lot of our arguments in the contemporary Jewish world really are for the sake of heaven in the sense that they are about the survival and mission of our people. We are a people who has been through the greatest trauma in the Holocaust and this has affected the way that we see the world, both our concern for Jewish survival and our concern for human rights and justice. We often sense how much is at stake in our disagreements.

However, our current debates are not for the sake of heaven when they are offered with anger, self-righteousness, and a lack of humility, when worse than that we attack others and brand them as traitors or enemies of our people.

Judaism recognizes the power of words probably more than any other tradition. The very Hebrew word for “word” *devar,* also means, “thing” or “object,” hinting that words have actual substance. So many of the confessions that we say on Yom Kippur are about the wrong use of words, and Judaism has many laws of proper speech including strong prohibitions against gossip (*lashon hara*) and slander (*motzi shem ra*). Our Sages thought that the use of proper words was so important that they viewed shaming a person with words as a kind of bloodshed. Rabbinic lore is replete with accounts of the disastrous effects of such shame, to the point that the Sages said that Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans as a punishment—not for violence and idolatry—but for baseless hatred and shaming others.

Ironically, the subject that most divides us as Jews, where we are most like to resort to ad hominen attacks is Israel. How did we get to a time when Israel, the one subject that could unite our diverse Jewish community, became the very source of some of our most intense divisions and disagreements? My mother, of blessed memory, told me how thrilling it was to gather around the family radio and hear the United Nations vote and the declaration of the state of Israel.

Just as the name of Israel’s national anthem is *Hatikvah*, “the hope,” so the establishment of Israel in 1948 held out two great hopes for the Jewish people: first, that Jews would now have a safe haven in a sometimes hostile world. Second, she told me, and equally as important, was the belief that Israel, the first modern state to be built on Jewish ethics and values, would surely become an ideal society. Right from the start two hopes were centered on Israel: Israel the safe homeland and Israel the prophetic, utopian dream. It’s not surprising that the two visions often come into conflict.

A few years ago my San Francisco Bay Area colleague Rabbi David J. Copper gave a Yom Kippur Sermon on two kinds of supporters of Israel: prophets and guardians. The Prophets, he said, are those who are more focused on justice and human rights issues often connected to the Palestinians, while the Guardians are “the folks for whom the oppression suffered by the Jewish people in a hostile world is paramount, and Israel represents our haven.”

Too often, he said, these two worthy tendencies come into conflict. Rabbi Cooper’s paradigm of the prophets and the guardians became a foundation of Project Reconnections, a program of dialogue about Israel within the Bay Area Jewish community. Through this program Jews on all sides of the issues came together to share their values and fears, to see that they actually share a vision of a thriving, peaceful Israel, but too often feel hurt and attacked by those with different political views.

Unfortunately, this summer’s Iran Nuclear Deal framework brought out the worst in our use of words. Dan Shapiro, the US Ambassador to Israel and a religious Jew, has been called a kapo, that is one of the Jews who helped the Nazi killing machine in the death camps. His life has been threatened multiple times. If we go back and remember the incitement that preceded the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin 20 years ago, we have to take such threats seriously. Likewise Rep. Jerrold Nadler from New York City, who has the most Jewish constituents of any US district and is a strong lifetime supporter of Israel, has had similar vicious personal attacks on his decision to vote for the deal. On the other hand, opponents of the deal like Senator Schumer have been called war-mongers and accused of dual loyalty.

As my friend and colleague Rabbi Barry Block said in his Rosh Hashanah sermon (yes, many rabbis have been giving sermons on this topic this year), “If we have branded each other as Nazi sympathizers and war mongers, we won't be able to work together. If we write off all who favor the agreement as foes of Israel, calling on them for support may be untenable. If we conduct what remains of this debate for the sake of heaven, we may enhance Israel's security. . . In our imperfect, unredeemed, pre-Messianic world, we cannot expect universal agreement – among Americans or among Jews. We can, however, disagree agreeably. We can guard our tongues, vowing to conduct all our disputes for the sake of heaven, with moderate words, with critique rather than with accusation. Perhaps that’s the best we can do in this imperfect world, on this flawed planet where nobody possesses unique, absolute knowledge about how best to keep the peace.”

The Westchester Board of Rabbis (130 area rabbis, of which I am one of the newest members) sent out a letter this holiday season to “call attention to a sin which has plagued our communities this past year, and which must not be carried forward, into the next. The sin is *sinat chinam*- gratuitous hatred; a hatred which is unwarranted, unproductive, and uncalled for. The debate over the proposed Iran deal has gone from robust to acrimonious. Accusing fellow Jews of deliberately and willfully undermining the safety of Israel, by either supporting or opposing the deal, is beyond the acceptable limits of rhetoric. Verbally assaulting and insulting those who disagree with our viewpoint is both destructive and divisive. . .

   The continuing tensions have produced conditions in which ongoing, pointless, yet, deeply- rooted hate has begun to infect our souls. In this new year, we call upon our community to reject malicious gossip, speech in which hate-like words are heard, and humiliation of those with whom we disagree. We pray that this new year will usher in renewed feelings of solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Israel, in the United States, and around the world.” (Thus concludes our rabbinic letter.)

What about in our own small PCS community? We may be feeling comfortable because we have publicly avoided this summer’s slugfest. But surely over the years our transdenominational community has disagreed on many synagogue practices and priorities. At times the disagreement has been public, and at times whispered behind closed doors. We are diverse in our backgrounds and practices and we will inevitably disagree. But can we do it the Torah’s way? Can we remember to always question if our motives are “for the sake of heaven” and realize the power of every word we say to wound or to heal and build? I think that the key lies on listening more deeply to others.

Over the years I have started two dialogue groups where we could speak respectfully with people of other faiths and viewpoints. In Texas, I cofounded a Palestinian-Jewish dialogue with a Muslim Imam. (And by by doing this we were each subjected to hateful speech by some in our own communities.) In California, I helped to start the Celebration of Abraham, a program bringing together Jews, Christians and Muslims to learn more about one another’s faiths and to get to know one another as neighbors. My mentors in these efforts were Len and Libby Traubman, founders of the Living Room Dialogue movement and amazing peace activists. They taught me that Dialogue is not debate; it is listening deeply. We started with people telling their personal stories. We listened with respect to one another. Such deep listening has the miraculous potential to turn enemies into friends and allies for the greater good.

The Jewish watchword is the Shema, the commandment to listen. In the ALEPH Rabbinic program, we would often do a Hassidic practice of sharing our personal experience or teaching, and when each was done speaking, everyone answered, “shamati,” I heard.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, chair of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University, taught this Rosh Hashanah: Why did the Jews merit to receive the Torah at Sinai? Rashi points out that when they came to Sinai, the Torah suddenly records their actions in the grammatical singular, as if they did everything as one, with unity. Similarly, he says, in a marriage, a congregation, or any long term relationship, we are different, we disagree, sometimes strongly but if we want the relationship to last *we have to disagree in a way that the other person won’t hate us when they disagreement ends*. When we do things that honor our relationship, that recall our unity, we can disagree for the sake of heaven.

In the coming year, let us not be afraid to disagree. Let us not be afraid to explore and wrestle with the many important and contentious issues facing our community and our world. Let us talk openly and transparently about synagogue decisions and goals. But let us do this the Torah’s way, the best Jewish way, by making our disputes for the sake of heaven, knowing the power of our words to wound or to heal, and above all, listening deeply to one another. Then we will be as one people, each an individual, but all standing together to receive Torah.