

Rosh HaShanah | 5781/2020
Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill, MA
Virtual services
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The High Holy Days are supposed to be the culmination of a process of t'shuvah, of return, of looking at ourselves honestly and feeling a sense of returning to who we really want to be in the world. Granted there often is a gap between the ideal we have for ourselves, and our lived reality. But the point is to keep aiming for that ideal, while in the process not being too hard on ourselves. The liturgy constantly reminds us that so long as we repent, make amends with those we've wronged, and commit to not repeating the problematic behavior, Gd is endlessly forgiving. The flip side of Gd's endless forgiveness for us is that we similarly need to be forgiving of ourselves, and of others. Certainly, there are people in our lives who it may be impossible to forgive, such as those who betray or abuse us. But otherwise our default should mirror Gd's: we should let go of grudges and resentments and give the people that we love a second chance.

In our particular historical moment, though, this can be especially challenging. Resentments and rage are boiling over between us and our loved ones, or even between us and people we don't even know, because they hold different views on issues that we hold so dear and that our very survival seems to depend on. Our knee-jerk rejection of the political "other" seems to be a recent phenomenon given the echo chambers of social media. But in fact, our texts show that this tendency towards siloed judgment has been around a long time. The long list of sins in the traditional confession, Al Chet, includes rashly judging others, conspiratorial glances, condescension, arrogance, and hardening our hearts. All of these phrases could be used to describe our current behavior of attacking or shunning someone who doesn't think or feel the way we do.

The content and the form of the Mishnah and the Talmud make clear that, in the Rabbinic tradition, dissent and debate are of the highest order. Both texts incorporate majority and minority—and sometimes even a plurality of—opinions. The Talmud is essentially a pastiche of conflicting opinions, the study of which is meant to develop our ability to recognize the merits of each position—and be comfortable with the contradictions inherent in doing so. The deep cultural impact of this textual dialectic is demonstrated by the modern saying: "Two Jews, three opinions."

The word in Rabbinic Hebrew for disagreement or dispute is *makhlochet*, which literally means *division*. According to Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Fathers, in the Mishnah, a makhlochet or a disagreement has the potential to be "לשם השמים"—"for the sake of heaven." I interpret this as meaning that there is something qualitative about certain types of disagreements that render them holistically beneficial to the community, including on the spiritual level.

In the Mishnah, the disagreements between the schools of thought of two sages—Hillel and Shammai—are offered as examples of those that are “לשם השמים.” In Talmud tractate Eruvin, there is a story where the followers of Hillel and Shammai are engaged in a years-long disagreement about the halachah, the rules by which the Jewish people would live. In the midst of this stand-off, a divine voice calls out from heaven and says, “The words of both of the sages are the words of the living Gd,” meaning both sides’ opinions are valid. Nevertheless, the text continues, “The halachah is in accordance with Hillel.” And why? Because he was patient and agreeable, and he always presented Shammai’s opinion as well as his own. To use contemporary language, Hillel gave air time to both sides, and conducted himself with civility.

I have a good friend who I’ll call Dave who is on the opposite end of the political spectrum from me, especially regarding Israel. We met ten years ago when our daughters became best friends in the first few weeks of kindergarten. Over the years, we spent Shabbat dinners together, went to the beach, the Children’s Museum, all of the things that families with young kids do. And though we knew that we were not on the same page politically, we never talked about it, and I mean never. Then finally, a couple of years ago, we were at a school social event, and in an off-hand way I said, “Dave, let’s talk about Israel.”

I’d love to say that we then had rich conversations where we respectfully listened to each other, and as a result our own positions became more sophisticated. But no, the conversation devolved, he sent me what felt like extremist articles supporting his position, I felt attacked, and I shut down. It took almost a year for us to get over our hurt feelings, and now we’re back to our previous status quo. We just don’t talk about Israel. The friendship feels a little more precarious than before, as if we’ve both realized that we’re essentially sitting on top of a volcano that could erupt at any moment. But we’re friends again. I am friends with Dave because I enjoy his company, I respect him; he’s kind, generous, smart, worldly, thoughtful, and a great father. We just have totally opposite ideas regarding what bodes well for the Jews, for Israel, and for humanity. Though I take some satisfaction in simply being friends with someone on the other side of the aisle, ultimately, I feel I’ve failed because our differences remain in a kind of stagnant no-man’s land rather than being interwoven into the fabric of our friendship.

Dr. Brené Brown, a sociologist who has written extensively on shame and vulnerability, names the problem with avoiding hard conversations:

People often silence themselves, or “agree to disagree” without fully exploring the actual nature of the disagreement, for the sake of protecting a relationship and maintaining connection. But when we avoid certain conversations, and never fully learn how the other person feels about all of the issues, we sometimes end up making assumptions that not only perpetuate but deepen misunderstandings, and that can generate resentment.

This is a very accurate description of my relationship with Dave: for the sake of preserving our relationship, we steer clear of a topic that we know we don't agree on. When we finally tried to talk about it, our emotions ran so high that we never got to the point of having an actual conversation. To this day, Dave and I don't have a full sense of each other's views, which is exactly what Brené Brown warns is the danger of failing to "explore the nature of the disagreement"—misunderstandings abound and the relationship remains stunted.

A few months after Dave and I had our blow-up, I participated in a mini-workshop facilitated by Resetting the Table that was held at my rabbinical school. Resetting the Table is an apolitical organization that promotes dialogue about Israel at synagogues, Hillels, and Jewish organizations around the country. Resetting the Table's goal is to overcome communal avoidance of talking about Israel. They offer excellent facilitation that allows people who disagree with each other to actually have a productive conversation. In the two-hour workshop with my fellow rabbinical and cantorial students, I realized how difficult this work is, how it takes real commitment and a kind of open-mindedness that is a stretch even for clergy.

In recognition of the ever-growing political polarization within this country, Resetting the Table has refocused their work over the last year on the Purple states. They recently released a video about several-day workshops they held in rural Wisconsin over the summer. Watching the video, I was brought to tears at the sight of people with radically different backgrounds and viewpoints sharing openly and really listening to each other. At the close of the workshop, one of the participants articulated how the experience challenged his preconceived ideas about the political "other":

I will name my appreciation for this helpful reminder that people of opposing political viewpoints aren't the caricatures that I often assume they are. It's been a joy to encounter people who bring more nuance and complexity to their politics than I lazily assume is true most of the time.

The work of Resetting the Table gives me hope that buried beneath our entrenched political divide resides a longing to understand and even connect with those we disagree with.

I opened this sermon with a couple of Rabbinic texts on makhlochet, or disagreement, in the context of legal opinions or halachah. I want to close it with another Rabbinic text that further underscores our tradition's deep faith in and commitment to disagreement as a force for good. This text appears in the section of the Talmud dealing with the judicial system. Until the year 425 in the CE, local judicial bodies called Lesser Sanhedrins were made up of twenty-three rabbis, and a majority vote was needed to either convict or acquit. This particular law states that in a death penalty case where all twenty-three rabbis vote to convict, the defendant must be

acquitted. Let me repeat: where the rabbis unanimously decide that a defendant is guilty of a capital crime, the defendant is exonerated, released, let go. This is the exact opposite of our own criminal justice system which generally requires *unanimous* jury verdicts in order to convict or acquit.

An eighteenth-century Chasidic rebbe known as the Yismach Moshe offers the following rationale for what seems like such a radical law: “When there is no opposition offering questions and arguments, the matter cannot be completely illuminated, and it is possible that all are subject to error ... Understand that by everyone striving to make their point, the picture will sharpen and truth will come to light.” The Yismach Moshe’s commentary highlights that in the context of a capital case, a guilty verdict was upheld *only* if it was arrived at after a hearty debate, and a unanimous verdict signaled that no such debate had taken place.

The Yismach Moshe articulates a strong argument against siloed discourse and the dangers of “groupthink” by claiming that unless our opinions are the product of a robust exchange of ideas they are worthless. When we stick to our own camp and avoid the risks and vulnerability inherent in having interactions with those who don’t agree with us, we lose out on the potential refinement of—or even shifting of—our ideas. Perhaps an even greater consequence of staying siloed is the loss of human connection and community.

All of the texts I have shared with you today reflect that, for the Rabbis, engaging with those we disagree with—even when the stakes are very high as in a death penalty case—is a moral imperative. As scary as it may feel, when the moment is right, I’m going to reach out to Dave again in the hopes that we will have the conversation that feels so painful and threatening. My wish for you in the coming year is that you begin the hard work of trying to break down any walls that separate you from the political “others” in your life, in the hopes that you may one day have the kind of dialogue envisioned by the Rabbis.