

A Jewish Response to Polarization
Rosh HaShanah Day One 5785/2024

Many years ago, I taught teens at Prozdor, a Jewish high school program which met on Sundays and sometimes during the week. Back then, most of the faculty taught a combination of core classes with a set curriculum and electives which we designed on our own. One of my electives was called “The Bible Says So... Or Does It?” In the class, we looked at idioms which came from the Bible and compared their modern usage to their original context. One of the first expressions we looked at was “Am I my brother’s keeper?” For the modern context I showed part of the Keynote Address from the 2004 Democratic National Convention.

In this speech, then **Senator** Obama spoke about polarization, though he didn’t name it as such. In response to his observation that there are those who are preparing to divide us, he said:

“...there's not a liberal America and a conservative America - there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America. The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States and Blue States; Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too... We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.”¹

Back in 2004, I remember thinking “YES! That is spot on!” I felt as though he had just articulated so clearly things I had been thinking for a long time, even all the way back to my childhood. My politically conservative parents used to tell me that

¹ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/keynote-address-the-2004-democratic-national-convention>

Republicans and Democrats wanted a lot of the same end goals, but they just had different ideas for how to get there.

Sadly, twenty years after Obama gave that keynote address, our country is more divided than ever before, to the point that many people have told me that their relatives choose no longer to speak to each other, to the point that many of us feel unsafe around people who have different beliefs and opinions, to the point that we no longer believe that everyone wants a lot of the same end goals anymore.

I do NOT claim to have any definitive answers to how to end the painful polarization of our world. However, in this season of repentance and renewal, Jewish wisdom and teachings can help us to repair and maintain our relationships, even in the face of polarization. Jewish tradition has a lot to say about how to value opinions which are different or even the complete opposite of our own. I would like to offer a few selections to guide us in the very necessary and holy work of remaining in relationship with our fellow human beings.

For the first piece of Jewish wisdom, let's return to my time teaching at Prozdor. Another elective I taught there was "Ethical Debate." My goal was to teach teenagers how to present and hear effective arguments without attacking each other. Back then, I only had an instinct that facilitating debate would help students hone their own beliefs. Little did I know that there are Jewish texts to support that feeling.

The rabbis of the Talmud asked what is meant by Proverbs 27:17, which says "As iron sharpens iron, so a person sharpens the wit of a friend." They say that this

verse teaches us that just as iron tools sharpen each other when they are used together, so too, when people study together, they sharpen each other's minds.²

When my students would prepare their side of the debate, they had to anticipate the other side's arguments. During the debate itself, they needed to listen to the other side so that they could formulate effective rebuttals and so that they could strengthen their own arguments. This structured form of discussion helped them with their own arguments and required them to listen to their peers; it did not usually lead them to change their minds.

BUT changing their minds wasn't the goal. Neither was it my intention that they agree with each other or to find a compromise between their positions. After all, I **was** teaching them how to debate, how to argue effectively and respectfully.

The resolution of a **disagreement** is not necessarily **agreement**. We might not even reach a compromise position. Disagreement itself is not a problem. The **real** problem is not listening to and connecting with one another. Our goal when we disagree needs to be **understanding** – understanding ourselves and understanding other people.

When we find ourselves disagreeing with other people, Jewish tradition calls on us to listen, and listen really well, in order to understand how they arrived at their position. Perhaps, in the process of listening, we might learn something new that causes us to reevaluate our original opinion. Perhaps in the process of listening, we could learn something about other people that helps us empathize with them and

² BT Ta'anit 7a
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have compassion for them. When we listen in this way, we remain in and strengthen relationships with the other person.

Listening to different opinions is NOT easy. Listening to and trying to understand multiple opinions can feel overwhelming. It is **so** much easier to have a single answer or response to a particular issue! However, Judaism has survived and even thrived on preserving a multiplicity of perspectives.

We are not the first generation to feel overwhelmed by opposing points of view. The rabbis of the Talmud would gather in groups to study³. Within those groups, they often would debate – some would permit a particular action while others would forbid the same action; some would declare a witness’s testimony valid while others would judge that same testimony invalid. They debated so much that a person might ask “how can I study Torah when it contains so many opinions?”

The rabbis answer that all opinions were given from one original source, that God gave us opinions or at least the ability to form them. All of these conflicting viewpoints are part of the oneness of God. The rabbis then advise us to make our ears like a funnel and to have an understanding heart so that we can hear conflicting opinions and recognize the opportunity for holiness even in the discomfort of disagreement.

Let’s bring these two ideas together. How might we be willing to open our ears and our hearts so that we sharpen our understanding?

³ BT Chagigah 3b
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I read an opinion piece in the Washington Post which gave an example of the power of fostering dialogue between people with whom we disagree. The article described a research project which brought people with different views on various issues into conversation. It goes on to describe the experience of two people from similar backgrounds and geographic location to have a conversation about their opposing views on gun ownership.

Neither person was optimistic about how this conversation would go. However, after an initially bumpy start, they began to share their personal stories which had shaped their positions on the issue. By the end of their conversation, they reported feeling less hostile towards the other and more humble about their own position. Furthermore, the two people were surprised by how much they had learned and how much they had enjoyed the time together.⁴

What transpired to make this possible? The author of the article wrote:

[Good disagreeers](#) don't hide their own perspective, but they also express genuine curiosity about others' views and point out common ground when they see it. They share personal stories and ask about each other's experiences. This type of exchange isn't just nice — it's powerful. [In our work](#), we find that people who empathize during disagreement are better able to persuade others. If you want someone else to open their mind, a great place to start is opening yours first.

Although the Washington Post is a secular source, this article is in alignment with the Jewish teachings I just shared. In the conversation between these two

⁴https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/09/10/cognitive-therapy-heal-political-division/?fbclid=IwY2xjawFWkYZleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHWRlugmaDh9o8DdmgriYXywFd7FFi5k3YOZZtM4_oEBfpwokBkMPq6aA8A_aem_W4yCCnhTmHTElev59ldR_g

people, each of them chose to be a little vulnerable by sharing something personal. When each shared their story, the other person listened with openness and curiosity. They had made their ears into a funnel and opened their hearts. And finally, at the end of their conversation, they realized they had learned a lot from each other; they had sharpened each other's wit, just like the iron in the verse from Proverbs.

Let's be honest and real here – being willing to listen to opinions opposite from our own might feel completely impossible or unreasonable in the current social climate. We might not feel ready to open ourselves up to someone with completely opposing views from our own. We feel safer to surround ourselves with people who are like us and who share our beliefs. Yet we know that the only way to “fix” our polarized society is by facing it and having conversations with people with different perspectives.

How do we get to a point where we feel capable of approaching these types of conversations? Again Jewish tradition can guide us.

In this morning's Torah portion, Sarah demanded that Hagar and her son Ishmael be sent away permanently. God told Abraham to listen to his wife, and Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away. Shortly after they left, they ran out of water. Hagar feared the worst and placed Ishmael under a bush so that she wouldn't have to watch him die.

It is a heart wrenching tale. But for me, my heart does not ache for Sarah, who felt anxious about Isaac's future. No, my heart aches for Hagar, the woman who was not a progenitor of the Jewish people. Hagar – whose very name means “the

stranger.” I empathize with Hagar when I hear her story and imagine her experience. I, along with all Jews, have experienced rejection and exclusion. Our people have been cast out from so many places throughout Jewish history. We have been the stranger, just like Hagar is the stranger.

Our sacred texts instruct us, “do not oppress the stranger because you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.”⁵ Our ability to know the feelings of other people, our capacity for empathy, is what makes it possible for us to have relationships. Empathy creates connection and enables understanding between people.

When we encounter people who hold beliefs which disagree with our own, we see those people as “other,” as “strangers.” Our labeling them as “strangers” makes us cautious or even reluctant to engage with them, and yet that very same label of “stranger” **demands** that we strive to understand them.

The story of Hagar and the mandate that we not oppress the stranger remind us of our shared humanity. Today, the midrash teaches, is THE day we celebrate the creation of all people.⁶ Rosh HaShanah is not the birthday of the **Jewish** people; come back at Passover in the Spring to celebrate that. Instead, we celebrate that God made all of us—those who are **like** us and those with whom we might disagree – we see as strangers—in the Divine Image.⁷

⁵ Sh'mot/Exod. 23:9

⁶ Vayikra Rabbah 29:1

⁷ B'reishit/Gen. 1:26

When we remember that we all are made in the same Divine image, we no longer are completely strangers. With that Oneness in mind and in our hearts, we can strive to see past the differences we perceive in each other. We can open our ears and our hearts to learn all of the possible perspectives which originate from the same ultimate Creator. We can refine our own points of view through the blessing of constructive dialogue.

From the vantage point of twenty years after Obama's speech at the DNC, his vision of a united America might seem hopelessly naive. But, we can hold onto this vision to have hope that we can and will still find our way into conversation with one another.

And at the end of the conversation, may it be that we experience a profound truth that was expressed by King Saul's son Jonathan to David — "Behold, between you and me is God, always."