

Kindness and tolerance -looking past politics

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During a service at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe, when the Shema prayer was said, half the congregants stood up and half remained seated. 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, learned 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 that 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." Then the rabbi said to the old man, "The congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand." The old man exclaimed, "THAT is our tradition!"

As Jews, we do like to argue a lot. We are known to be bright, outspoken, and well, stubborn. Heck, we are called an *am oref*, a stiff necked people in the Torah as we kvetched our way through the wilderness. Debate is especially integral to our Jewish roots. The pages of Talmud are replete with rabbis sharing and contesting differing points of view. We have been honed by thousands of years of studying and our skills are sharp. Being verbal comes so easily to us that it can be difficult at times to wait, listen, keep silence, and think. Our standard dinners and holidays are usually loud and conversational. I remember one Thanksgiving with my ex husband's family in the Midwest where everyone was so quiet, I could hear their silverware clicking against their plates. I was so uncomfortable that I started talking about why no one talking. They looked up at in surprise and the silence was finally broken. In my family, if no one is talking or yelling, it means something really bad has taken place.

Even though I am more comfortable with high energy conversations and quick retorts, I realize that much can be gained by measuring one's words, reflecting before typing a response, and thinking ahead as to how one's words will impact another person. There has always been value to contemplating before speaking but perhaps we need this skill now more than ever. We

are living in a time of extreme partisanship, division and rancor. We are weeks away from a contentious election. Many are on edge and have deep-seated views. Add to a divisive election, is the pressure of living during a pandemic. We all thought Covid 19 would be dissipating by now and life would return to normal. As more people have been cut off from badly needed social interaction and others are deeply worried about their health and those of people they love, emotions are running high. I see strangers yelling at others in public. There is so much stress and uncertainty, that it's easy to fly off the handle and say or do something regrettable. Sadly, we can see how our frayed nerves are impacting our view of our fellow Americans, neighbors, friends, and even family.

I find myself most worried about our relationships at this time because I think we need one another now more than ever. There is a real danger in confining our social interactions to only those who agree with us. When we avoid people, information, and viewpoints that don't conform with our outlook, we can become more fearful and distrusting of others. We lose perspective on why people believe as they do, why things are important to them, and it's too easy to take the next step and label others as monsters, bigots, racists, anarchists, communists, and criminals. And it doesn't take long, even in our self-contained bubble of likeminded people that even then there will be some differing views on issues of the day. The temptation can be to unfriend them on line and even cut off in person contact. And we lose the ability to tolerate disagreements.

We all lose in this scenario. What we lose are connections, relationships, and even insights that can help us grow and feel a greater kinship with others. It has been getting harder and harder to talk with those across the political aisle. How many of you have friends or family with differing political perspectives? How many of you are able to discuss current issues of the day civilly? I am sure it is less today, than it was years ago.

I was intrigued by an article in Time magazine this past November 2019 by historian John Meacham where he beseeches us to not give in to extremism. He writes, "Eleanor Roosevelt offered a prescription to guard against tribal self-certitude. 'It is not only important but mentally invigorating to discuss political matters with people whose opinions differ radically from one's own,' she wrote. 'For the same reason, I believe it is a sound idea to attend not only the meetings of one's own party but of the opposition. Find out what people are saying, what they are thinking, what they believe. This is an invaluable check on one's own ideas ... If we are to cope intelligently with a changing world, we must be

flexible and willing to relinquish opinions that no longer have any bearing on existing conditions.’¹

Whoa! John Meacham by invoking Eleanor Roosevelt is encouraging us to purposely expose ourselves to the other side. So what would be a good equivalent? Those who watch MSNBC to switch to Fox? And Fox viewers to switch to CNN for a while? Actually, I don’t think that will be helpful but it is good to actually converse with another human being, one on one preferably. And if we aren’t feeling overly emotional, we can ask them to describe not what they think or believe but why they believe the way they do. For example, a friend’s mother does my hair in her backyard. She survived the Korean War as a child, had to fight an abusive husband, and started her own business from scratch. When she shares with me why she likes Trump, it makes sense because she values independence, hard work, and a tough, crude leader because she herself had to be likewise. When we try to understand why people believe the way they do, we can have some empathy for them, even though we know, we will vote the opposite of them in the election.

Meacham writes, “Wisdom generally comes from a free exchange of ideas and an acknowledgment that your team might be wrong and the other team might be right. To reflexively resist one side or the other without weighing the merits of a given issue is all too common—and all too regrettable. To elect to be impervious to argument is to preemptively surrender the capacity of reason to guide us in our public lives. Of course, it may be that you believe, after consideration, that the other side is wrong—but at least take a minute to make sure.”

What would it take for us to consider that those on the other side of this election may have some valid points or perspectives? Really? They are not all wrong, all the time. When it comes down to it, we are complicated and most of us don’t neatly fit into any political party on all issues. I want you to imagine someone you know who has very different point of view. Why do they believe as they do? If you can answer this, then you get a gold star for being able to listen. And if you can’t, that may very well be for the best. It was not easy to disagree with another person because we take things personally. When we hear someone we like or love who expresses a view that is the opposite of our own, we can feel rejected. The insult feels very personal. Our blood pressure starts to go up and we get into fight or flight mode.

Often, it may be best to just not talk about issues that are divisive. We can agree to disagree and agree to leave politics off the table. This can be a great tactic especially when we know that

we get very impassioned on certain subjects. Avoiding provocative topics, can be the best way for many of us. In doing so, we can keep our relationships intact with friends and family. So that when we see them or talk with them, there can be an agreement not to discuss politics but instead we can talk about each other's health, hobbies, love, children, and etc. There is no reason that we can't be around people of differing political persuasions. We can still value each other's ethics, personal traits, and kindness. We can still like and love one another.

One of my confirmation students one year asked, if having the same politics was a necessity in a marriage partner. How would you answer that? I know there are people who say they will only date a person of their political persuasion. However, I see a number of couples, especially in our community, where it's not an interfaith marriage but an inter-political one. Those of you who make it work do so because you respect one another, you decide when or if to dialogue on your differences, and you don't let it get in the way of love. I told this student that. With mutual respect, people can vote according to their heart and conscience, and still maintain their relationships.

But what if you wanted to engage with others? What if you wanted to be able to discuss even contentious issues? It can indeed be illuminating and rewarding but we have to first take our temperature on our emotional state. If we are feeling grounded and secure with who we are and our belief system, we will be less likely to overreact. So that if someone says something that we view as ridiculous, it will not enrage or upset us. Just because someone close to us says they will vote for Joe or Donald, or that they believe the news is helpful or fake, or that masks can save us all or is just for show, we can hear what they say and not get overwrought. This is not easy though to be sure.

We have some great examples in Judaism of people differing. In the Talmud, we see Hillel and Shammai embody an intriguing model for engagement. They lived in the 1st century BCE and were famous for taking different sides on most issues. Shammai felt that our Kiddush, the blessing over the wine, should mention the sanctity of the day first before the wine and Hillel argued the opposite. Shammai felt that our Chanukah menorah should start with all 8 lights burning on the first night and decrease with each evening while Hillel disagreed. This may sound minor to your ears but for those who take the blessings seriously and believe that one is following the will of God, then, well these can be critical issues.

Hillel and Shammai also had different ways of dealing with converts. A famous story is that a man came to Shammai and asked to convert providing he could teach Judaism while standing on one foot. Shammai chased him out with a stick. The same potential convert came to Hillel

and asked to convert to Judaism providing Hillel could teach him everything he needed to know while standing on one foot. Hillel looked at the man and responded, “What is hateful to you do not do to others. All the rest is commentary, go and study it.”² That’s a great line isn’t it? What is hateful to you, do not do to others. It’s even more practical than the Golden rule. Just to think of what would bother or hurt us, we decide not to do to others.

Most importantly, despite so many arguments between Hillel and Shammai recorded in our Talmud, we are told that their sons and daughters could marry one another and that their conflict was *l’shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven.

Now not all conflicts or arguments are good ones. We have a teaching in the Mishneh,
כָּל מַחְלָקָת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם

"Every controversy that is for the sake of Heaven will in the end be resolved. A controversy that is not for the sake of heaven shall not be resolved. Which controversy was for the sake of the heaven? The controversy between Hillel and Shammai. Which controversy was not for the sake of heaven? The controversy of Korah and his band. ."³

Disagreements or conflicts when they are about the greater good, *l’shem shamayim*, can be beneficial whether they are about defining law, exposing deep problems in our society, and exploring solutions that can help our community and nation better itself. However, when done to hurt, ostracize, or aggrandize, they are destructive. In the realm of our personal relationships, I find it helpful to assume when dealing with others that their hearts are in the right place. That they believe that it is in the interest of our country and our lives that certain things are followed or passed. If we can believe the best in others, or assume the good, it will help us in our conversations with them. Because good people can indeed have various approaches to the complexity of issues facing us at this time.

The most significant thing is to remember that we are all created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Yes, your irate uncle, your stubborn friend, and even your spouse. We are all human beings, striving and trying to do the best that we can. We all have fears, stress, and a need to be heard and loved. We really need one another. We need each other’s friendship and support. And so, maybe convincing another that we are right and they are wrong, isn’t that important. Maybe we can just let it go. I think we would all agree that it really isn’t significant if one stands or sits for the Shma. But what really matters are our friendships and relationships. Let’s keep our focus on why we like the people we do, remind ourselves of their wonderful traits and our shared interests, and we will find that we all have far more in common and we are in this together.

NOTES:

¹ <https://time.com/5720747/jon-meacham-trump-impeachment-inquiry/>

² Shabbat 31a On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, ‘Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.’ Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand.¹² When he went before Hillel, he said to him, ‘What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour:¹³ that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.’

³ Pirkei Avot 5:17

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“Kol Machloket shehi l’shem shamayim sofa l’hitkayem”, “Every controversy that is for the sake of Heaven will in end be resolved. A controversy that is not for the sake of heaven shall not be resolved. Which controversy was for the sake of the heaven? The controversy between Hillel and Shammai. Which controversy was not for the sake of heaven? The controversy of Korah and his band.”