



CONGREGATION
B'nai Torah

Talking in Synagogue

Rabbi Joshua Heller

Kol Nidre, 5780

Earlier this summer, I had the opportunity to visit the grave of my great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller. He had an impressive career as a community leader, a commentator, a legal mind, and philosopher. He also wrote a prayer, which, in modified form, has entered the traditional liturgy; it is now said in synagogues around the world, and is displayed at his grave site in Krakow.

“May the one who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David and Solomon bless anyone who guards his mouth and tongue from talking during services. May there descend upon him all of the blessings written in the Torah of Moses our teacher, the prophets and writings. May he see worthy descendants, and raise them to Torah, to the wedding canopy and good deeds, and serve God in truth and integrity. And let us all say, amen.”

In my 15 years at B'nai Torah, this prayer has never before, to my knowledge been recited at this congregation. Or who knows, maybe it has, and you just didn't hear it because people around you were talking.

So, that prayer would be the perfect set-up for a sermon about not talking in synagogue. And indeed, it's been a popular topic for many a sage. But, in fact, today I want to cover a very different topic. **How** to talk in synagogue.

Because you see, one might wonder what led my illustrious ancestor to compose this prayer. Was the revered *Altneue* synagogue in Prague, already in service for 350 years, a place of such rigid decorum, that my 17th century ancestor was moved to invoke God's greatest blessings upon the hushed assembly? Hardly! There is a practice in that synagogue, to this day, to repeat a key psalm of the Friday night service. The leader begins “*Mizmor Shir L'Yom Hashabbat*” and then, recites the same psalm again. Many origins have been proposed for this unusual practice, but the real answer is found in the annals of the community ritual committee: The start of the Friday night service was so often marked by so much hub-bub and commotion, that this prayer could not be heard, and the rabbi ordered that it be repeated.

For centuries, rabbis have been fighting a battle, trying to hold the line¹ against talking in synagogue. My ancestor, Rabbi Heller used the encouraging language of blessing. Today, we would call it “positive discipline.” But he is the exception. Our legal texts are full of curses and imprecations, warnings and exhortations, against talking in synagogue. Over the centuries have been dozens of sermons on why not to talk in synagogue. This is the first, I believe on HOW to talk in synagogue. I mean that literally – how to converse out there in the chairs. And before

¹ Sermon Bingo, continued



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I'm done, we may be able to learn something about what synagogues are really all about, and maybe about how we talk to each other wherever we are.

But why is it a problem to talk in synagogue at all? There's the story of the rabbi who asked a child, "Do you know why we don't talk in synagogue?" The child answered, in a whisper, "Because people are sleeping!"

Seriously, it should go without saying: when I'm praying, I'm talking to God. You would think it is disrespectful to stop talking to God between paragraphs or even mid-sentence to chat with the person sitting next to me! Indeed, there's a whole literature, that I will not review in depth here, that correlates the intensity and holiness of the prayer with the level of urgency, or social status of your conversational partner, required to merit an interruption. So, for example, if you are saying the *shema*, you can interrupt between paragraphs to respond to anyone's greeting, but you should only initiate conversation with someone of great social status. But if you are in the middle of a paragraph, you can only initiate conversation with someone whom you fear. While saying the *Amidah*, you should not pause even for the most dire reasons – a king interrupting you or a snake poised to bite your leg.

I get nervous, though, when someone puts their love for God too far above their respect for people. There was no one more committed to God than Abraham. On Rosh Hashanah, we read how God came to Abraham and told him to give up his only son, and Abraham accepted, really without question. Abraham was about to sacrifice his son; the knife was up. He was so intently focused on this ritual act, this act of worship, that an angel cries out to him, and the angel has to call to him twice "Avraham, Avraham" before Abraham turns to stop what he is doing. The idea that one would sacrifice a child for any cause, no matter how holy, gives me pause.

But, on the other hand, just a few chapters earlier, God Himself appeared before Abraham, but then as three guests arrived, Abraham had no compunction about asking God to "hold on" while he went to attend to what he believed were human visitors. Perhaps, even more shockingly, God endorsed this behavior. God grants us leave to turn from His service, if only for just a moment, to greet a human being who is created in the divine image. So, God forgives us, and perhaps even gives us a nod, to pause in our prayer to offer a greeting to a stranger, to a guest, to be polite. It's on that basis that I will interrupt my personal prayer to greet newcomers, or those in need of care, or just to call out page numbers.

But what if we are not actually praying? What if you've finished your *Amidah* and you are waiting for the rabbi to make that announcement about, "If you've completed your individual



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worship...”? Or perhaps when the Torah is being read? Our sages save the worst of their invective for people who talk at the times when it would be most logical, when they are not themselves praying. The *Shulhan Arukh*, the classic code warns² “A person may not speak of common things during the repetition of the *Amidah*, and if he does, he is a sinner and his offense is too great to bear.” The *Mishneh Berurah*³, doubles down, and proclaims that many synagogues were destroyed due to the offense of people talking while they are waiting for others to pray and that people must be appointed to prevent this sin.

Then, of course, yet another text, the *Arkch Hashulkhan* chimes in that there is one exception: if someone asks the rabbi an important question during the repetition, he should answer. Me thinks the rabbi doth protest too much. If people really want to talk in synagogue, there’s nothing that a hundred rabbis or more could ever do⁴.

If you are not concerned about disrupting your own prayers, consider the prayers of others.

And so, I offer this plea, that we learn **how** to talk in synagogue. Whether we interrupt our own prayer is between us and God. I believe that God forgives us if we turn from Him, for just a moment, to tend to the needs of one of the creatures He made in his image. Of course, it’s nice to wait until there is a break in the action, so to speak. But if we interrupt and interfere with the prayers of others, then God and our neighbors alike may be less patient. There are exceptions. I believe that children must feel like they have a place in the sanctuary. The ones who run around when they are little are the ones who will know how to behave when they reach Bar/Bat Mitzvah age. In the synagogue where I grew up, there were four older gentlemen who sat together, and, like Austin Powers after unfreezing, had lost the ability to whisper. We called them the “four horsemen of the Apocrypha.” They could be disruptive, but we were glad that they were still with us. As far as I’m concerned, if you are under 4 or over 84, have at it. Everyone else can learn how to talk quietly.

So, if talking in synagogue is prohibited by every law code, subject to the curses of a hundred rabbis, why come up with a way to excuse it? Is there anything good about talking in synagogue?

The story goes that one rabbi actually succeeded in stamping out talking in synagogue. In one version, he offered a fervent prayer to God. In another version, he perfected the “rabbi death stare.” That next Shabbat, nobody spoke in synagogue. You could hear a pin drop. Then the

² Shulhan Arukh OH 124:7

³ Mishneh Berurah 124:27

⁴ Sermon Bingo fail, this reference didn’t make it into the sermon as presented.



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next Shabbat. Then the next. But, be careful what you wish for. Before long, many of the local businessmen found themselves in financial trouble. Grain rotted in the silos, wood sat unchopped because deals weren't being made. There was a drop-off in the number of weddings because matches were not happening. Reluctantly, the rabbi retracted his request, and grew to tolerate, even appreciate, the whispers of some quiet conversation.

There is meant to be a social aspect to synagogue that I think any rabbi has to make peace with. It's inherent in the very name. What is a synagogue? You might say it is a place of prayer. But a "house of prayer" in Hebrew is a "*beit tefillah*." We don't generally call synagogues *Beit Tefillah* (there's one that's called that a few miles down the road, but I've heard that they talk over there, too). We call a synagogue a *Beit Knesset*, which means a place of gathering. Indeed, I think many people come to synagogue for reasons that are only indirectly related to prayer.

But that's not new. The best example is the Diopeloston of Alexandria. Rabbi Judah said⁵, "If you haven't seen the Diopeloston of Alexandria, Egypt, you never saw the glory of Israel." You may wonder what Diopeloston is. It's not a very expensive bike that connects to the internet. It's a synagogue that was so big that it had two rows of columns to hold it up. Sometimes there were 600,000 people there, like the multitude of the Exodus from Egypt, and some say even twice as many.

There was a wooden platform in the middle, and the *Hazan*, would stand upon it, with flags in his hand. When the time came to answer amen, he would wave the flags and the whole assembly would answer, amen.

This place was so huge, with so many people, and presumably so noisy, that you couldn't hear what was going on. Why would want to go to a synagogue with a cantor you couldn't even hear? Well, I suppose it depends on the cantor. Not every synagogue is lucky enough to have a cantor like Cantor Yoav!

The reason people came is what else happened at synagogue. Rabbi Judah explained that the people would not sit mixed - rather the goldsmiths would sit apart, the silversmiths would sit apart, the blacksmiths would sit apart, the metalbraiders would sit apart, and the weavers would sit apart. When a poor person came in, he would know the people of his trade, and turn towards them, and thence came his livelihood and the livelihood of his household.

⁵ Talmud, Sukkah 51b



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It didn't matter how big the synagogue was. It mattered that people came and found their people, found their connection. I think that is true for all of us. There could be 600,000 people in synagogue, 600 or 6, but you could feel alone, longing for some solitary company.

In my 2nd Day Rosh Hashanah sermon, on blessings, I talked about how when God created the world, He said that this was good, that was good. Light was good, plants are good, the sun moon and stars are great, everything is awesome. Do you want to guess the first thing that God said is **not** good? It's not disease. It's not death. God says "*Lo tov heyot he'adam levado*" – it is not good for man to be alone. The immediate solution was to cook up an order of spare ribs and make Eve. The first thing that God says is not good was is loneliness, the feeling of being disconnected.

And, indeed, it is not good. A recent study⁶ reports that being lonely means you have a 26% higher risk for early mortality. That's the same odds as smoking or drinking or being obese, and not nearly as fun as any of those things!

We yearn for company. And, as Americans, we are lonelier than ever; 47% of Americans report being lonely, up from half that number a few decades ago.

Our congregation is not 600,000 or even 6,000 people, but the people in this room are at the same risk of loneliness as everyone else out there. What I hear, and I know, is that what each of us wants to be connected. We might **also** care how much Hebrew is in the service. We might **also** care if men and women can participate. We might **also** care how long services are. If it's noisy. If it's too hot or too cold. We might feel one way or the other about the rabbi. But what people care about most is whether they feel like they are part of a community that cares for them.

So, our congregation is doing something about it.

We're taking a page from the book of the synagogue of Alexandria. No, we are not installing a flag system, but we are starting a way of helping people find their connections. And, you don't even need to come to services to do it. It's called "B'nai Torah Bridges." It's a way of connecting members of our community into small groups, not based on whether they are weavers or silversmiths, but based on other things that bring people together.

⁶ <https://www.mdlinx.com/internal-medicine/article/3272>



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A few of you are nodding and saying, “Ah yes, I remember this; it’s called a *Havurah*.” And *havurot* were, and are, a great thing. They are groups of families that join together for Shabbat dinners. They will rally around each other for lifecycle events, good and bad. The blessing, and curse, of *havurot*, is that they assume a nuclear family. Well, sometimes nuclear families go through fission, or just get nuked altogether. About half of all couples end up getting divorced. Who gets custody of the *havura*?

Not just the *havura*, but a lot of synagogue language is built around the idea of families. What if you don’t fit into the stereotypical box of husband, wife, 2.3 kids and a dog. You were single to begin with or you were all young couples and everyone else in your peer group had kids, and you couldn’t or chose not to? What if you come to synagogue and you have the feeling like you are the one outlier, the one outcast, that you are the one person who doesn’t look like everyone else? That’s where small groups come into play.

Small groups happen naturally all the time. Our synagogue has plenty of them. Our softball teams, knitzvah knitting group, your mah jong or poker group, are all small groups of people gathered around a common interest. But B’nai Torah Bridges does something more. The essence of a small group is that it not only connects you with other Jews, but it also connects you back to your Judaism. The group is governed by a covenant, a *brit*, of mutual responsibility and respect, and every gathering has some bit of spirituality, something that helps you develop your soul a little bit further, too.

The story is told of the man who would come to synagogue every week, and never even cracked a book. He talked up and down about his atheism. They asked him, “Well then, why are you coming at all?”

He responded, “Well, you see, I come and sit next to Mr. Goldberg. Goldberg comes to talk to God, and I come to talk to Goldberg.”

You come into a small group looking to connect with people around an area of common interest: baking challah for seniors, stand-up comedy, vegan eating, cancer survivors, home brewers, comic books, pets, self-defense. It doesn’t matter whether there is anyone else in your household is interested. What matters is that you commit to connecting to other people. And along the way, you might also connect to God.

Right now, we have two pilot groups going. We are looking for people who would like to learn how to lead our next 15-20 groups starting in January. If you are interested, go to the B’nai Torah Bridges Web Page: <https://www.bnaitorah.org/bnai-torah-bridges> . We will train our



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leaders how to help everyone who participates make meaningful connections and be spiritual guides. We'll actually teach you how to talk in synagogue (though maybe not in the sanctuary).

Before I finish talking about talking in synagogue, I must note that even as we are working on encouraging people, (in a way) to talk in synagogue, it is getting harder. It's not just about whether we interrupt this prayer or that prayer, which still seems to be easy enough for people. It's not even about who we talk to. It's about what we say. My wife likes to say, "If you don't have anything nice to say... come sit by me." That's why you'll almost never see me sit with her in synagogue. We have less nice things to say.

I don't think it will surprise anyone if I make the claim that, as a society, we are finding it harder and harder to speak politely with each other or to speak kindly about each other. You've heard the story of the four old men who are sitting together drinking coffee. One calls out, "Oy." The next says, "Gevalt!" The third says, "Terrible." The fourth says, "If you guys don't stop talking politics, I'm leaving."

Our political climate has become so polarized, that every time I imagine it can't get any worse, it does. Just one example: Every two years, AIPAC, which promotes bipartisan advocacy for the Israel/US relationship, has taken most of the new members of congress to Israel. Everyone is making a fuss about the two Democratic Congresswomen who did not go this past time around. The story that nobody followed is that this year were 40 Democrats and 30 Republicans who went, among the largest groups ever. What has changed is that the new representatives used to go as one group. Now, the trips are separated into two groups by party, though they do overlap by a bit.

It's no longer enough to declare or prove that your opponents are wrong. They must be evil as well. Working together on issues of common interest has become a black mark. There are a lot of reasons for this. One is the fragmentation of media. We're not watching the same news; we are not getting the same facts. I think there used to be a sense that you were publishing information to inform, with a commitment to truth. It used to be that if you posted something in error, you would admit it, even if only with a Rosanne Rosanna Danna "never mind." Now the goal is to inflame, to enrage. It's only going to get worse, as words like impeachment and treason fill the air.

We have caught the same bug in synagogue. It's a shame, because our Jewish tradition values respectful conversation. Our tradition records that Hillel and Shammai, and the schools that they founded, disagreed about many of the most essential questions of practice. Not just how to bless this or that, but what was kosher, what marriages were legitimate. But they did not



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shy away from eating together, from marrying each other's families. They discussed, they debated. They talked!

How did we get to the point where Jews can't talk to each other? I think there are a few reasons for the change. One is that Jews are like everyone else, only more so. When society sneezes, we also catch cold. Another is that it used to be that Jews got involved in politics. Now, politics gets involved in Jews. What I mean by that is that it used to be that individual Jews supported candidates or endorsed policies, but, other than maybe support of Israel, political ideas were not central to our identity as Jews. Over the past year, you have increasingly seen political figures, some of them not even Jewish, by trying to inject claim that their policy or approach is the only one consistent with Jewish values, and that some other is disloyal to our tradition.

Also, I think we, as Jews, are scared. I'm not sure if I'm talking too much, or too little, about how the Jewish world has changed since Pittsburgh October 27. The idea that Jews are a target was something that Jews in every other country understood,⁷ but we had the luxury of pretending to ignore. Now, we look for answers. What is the source of this evil?

Some of that answer is specific to Jews. Talking about the roots, the meaning of anti-Semitism, and how we fight it is a whole other sermon. I've given it before and I'll give it again, I'm sure. But this is also a symptom of a sickness that is not aimed only at us but afflicts our entire society. We are not the only victims of mass violence. Domestic terrorists have gunned down schoolchildren, concertgoers, churchgoers, Wal-Mart shoppers, people out on a Saturday night. The issue is not mental illness. Most people with mental illness are a danger primarily to themselves. The psychologists tell violent video games don't move the needle very much either. Easy access to weapons of mass destruction is clearly an important part of the equation, but is not the whole story. What many of these mass murderers have in common with each other, and with terrorists around the world, is loneliness and desperation. They feel left out, disconnected. They have few or no friends, feel misunderstood by family. If they seek approval, it is from an online echo chamber that reflects back animosity and loathing but offers no real support. What many of these murderers have in common, beyond choice of weapon or ideology, is that they did not have anyone they could call a best friend.

Lo tov heyot headam levado. God knew that loneliness is, in some real sense, one of the roots of evil. God really wants us to turn and talk to our neighbor. So much so, that God may even wink if, coincidentally, we happen to be in synagogue when we do it. My ancestor, Yom Tov

⁷Less than 12 hours after I offered this sermon, an anti-semitic gunman tried to attack a synagogue in Germany and was turned away.



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Lipman Heller, tried to stamp out talking in synagogue and it didn't work. And so, we have to figure out how we continue to talk to each other, even in a world where political disputes have a way of escalating.

Indeed, my father, of blessed memory, used to invoke the initials of two famous presidents to describe the divide among Jews in his day. He talked about FDR Jews and JFK Jews. It's not about their political affiliation: FDR Jews come For Davening Reasons. JFK Jews: Just For Kiddush. They came for different reasons, but all were in synagogue. To this day, people come for reasons other than prayer, and I've come to terms with that.

I don't know if I've changed your mind about talking in shul. I don't know if, after a few minutes, you will talk more or less. Maybe the Ritual Committee will add my ancestor's prayer to the liturgy. I do know that every human being is made in the image of God. And that we come closer to God whenever we connect with another person, even if it is someone with whom we share a totally random interest, having nothing to do with Judaism. Perhaps especially if it's someone we disagree with. If we can talk in synagogue, even though it is to another person, perhaps that trains us to talk to our mutual Creator as well. And if we can do it quietly, so much the better.

So now, talk amongst yourselves; I'll give you a few minutes.