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Annual Meeting Opening Teaching: Justice, Empathy, and Curiosity

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There's an ongoing argument at Rabbi Cohen's shul over whether you sit or stand for the Shema, a central Jewish prayer. The fighting is getting worse. People are threatening to leave the shul unless they get their way.

Rabbi Cohen can't get the community to be reasonable, so he goes to visit one of the oldest members, Mr. Bernstein, who is nearly 100 years old.

"Mr. Bernstein," the rabbi says, "I need to speak with you. This fighting over the Shema is getting out of hand. I need your help. What was the original tradition at our shul, to stand during the Shema, to show our respect to God? Or to sit, to show our humility before God?" Mr. Bernstein shakes his head and says "No."

The rabbi asks his question in a different way. Still, the answer is "No." Confused, the rabbi says, "Mr. Bernstein, it has to be one or the other! Please help—we need an answer. People aren't speaking to each other and we've got fist fights in the parking lot!"

And Mr. Bernstein smiles, nods, and says, "That's the tradition!"

If someone tries to convince you that in the old days there were no conflicts in our communities, they are either lying or deluding themselves. That said, conflicts now seem to run so much deeper in our communities. For us, it's not usually about the Shema. But to say the obvious, now, it's the Israel-Hamas war or the war in Gaza.

About five years ago I taught about Israel-Palestine at a local high school. The students asked me clarifying questions or my opinion on various issues. I was invited back this year, and as I was preparing to speak to 150 students, I felt like every word I said would be judged. And it was true – almost every question I got was actually a criticism dressed up as a question.

This is what polarization looks like.

And it made me think: curiosity is one of the many, many casualties of this war.

As we come together as a community, I want to offer a framework for thinking about and talking about the war. And not just the war, but thinking about many issues that are controversial.

If you imagine a triangle, each point represents justice, empathy, and curiosity. Sometimes, it makes sense to stand only at one point, to be fully immersed in justice, or in empathy, or in curiosity. But really, our goal should be to stand in the center of the triangle, to fully internalize and express the principles and practices of justice, empathy, and curiosity.

Our sense of justice is likely rooted in Jewish values and texts: “*tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – justice, justice you shall pursue.” But our sense of justice has to go beyond that. Which contemporary political perspectives resonate for us? What is our vision of justice in Israel-Palestine? How do we collectively create a world that is fair and democratic, where all people have their basic needs met, and where no one lives under the ugly shadow of war?

Next is empathy, trying to feel what someone else feels. While we can never truly understand someone else’s experience, it is important that we try. The goal should not be empathy for just one people, but empathy for all people living in Israel-Palestine. It is surely easier to empathize with people who look like and act like us. But the spiritual challenge is to empathize with people who are different from us. We do not have to agree with them, but we do need to try to imagine and understand someone else’s feelings and reactions.

And lastly, curiosity: being truly interested in someone else’s ideas. So often we listen to prepare our defense or score a point. Climbing into someone else’s mind and considering their perspectives is also a spiritual practice. Curiosity is the basis for critical thinking, the goal of deeply analyzing and evaluating ideas. We should identify someone else’s biases, challenge their assumptions, and dispute inaccurate claims. But first, taking someone seriously enough to be curious about what they think and why they think it matters.

If we stand inside the triangle and weigh justice against empathy against curiosity, and we feel and speak to the tensions they produce all together, we can make our communities become more moral, compelling, and engaging.

As we come together to do the business of our congregation, let us remember that we are here to foster a community rooted in justice, empathy, and curiosity.