

Back in 2nd century Israel:

A gang of hoodlums lived in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood, and they used to torment him endlessly. Rabbi Meir prayed for their death.

His wife Bruria said to him: "How did you reach such a decision?" He replied: "The Bible says, '*Let sins be obliterated from the earth.*'" (*Psalms 104:35*) She answered: "Is it written 'sinners??' The verse sonly speaks of '*sins.*' Look further to the end of that verse: '*And the wicked will be no more.*' Once the *sins* are removed, then of course '*the wicked will be no more.*' Therefore, pray that these *hoodlums' sins* be gone, that these hoodlums change, and then they will not be '*wicked*' anymore."

Rabbi Meir prayed for them, and they indeed mended their ways.

(Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 10a)

This story makes a point: Can we disapprove of, oppose an action/opinion/attitude but still respect/honor/care for the person who has it?

Bruria could do it – and she taught Rabbi Meir how to do it – BUT it seems to me that **Nowadays We just can't!!**

One Word defines our current environment:

Polarization, meaning "if I strongly disagree with you – then I strongly dislike you, I strongly don't want anything with you, and I strongly refuse to join with you for anything."

In our current culture: "You have a 'bad' opinion? You voiced a 'wrong' idea? Then the Problem is... is You! We must strongly condemn you, shun you, shame you if we can; if you have a public persona – we should cancel you, fire you, make you resign.

As we moved to condemning persons instead of their opinions, people now have come to despise and hate even those they never met, though knowing nothing about them!! Think I am exaggerating? Take a look at exchanges in Twitter; take a minute to look at comments on YouTube videos: hate back-and-forth over a song, a pic, a one-line comment!

Having said all this, I don't think that our goal should be trying hard to find "how can we all come to agree", or "like each other better". *That would be nice – but that's not the real world.*

So our true Big Issue is "Can we learn how to disagree better"?!

We know how to fight - know how to condemn, know how to shame, how to boycott and shun. **But we do not know anymore how to disagree**, without fighting/shaming/condemning and shunning?

We have become Rabbi Meir – **praying against the "bad people"**, to get them terminated. We can and should rather be Bruria: **praying against the "bad ideas", praying for "the people who hold them"**, that soon those bad attitudes and ideas are gone from them.

On Facebook, in my Rabbinic CCAR group, a colleague Rabbi (in a Massachusetts Reform Congregation), recently shared: “I want to speak on climate change, on Jewish value of caring for all creation...but I’m afraid: it’s too partisan, too divisive, people will get offended, there will be backlash...”

This sentiment was shared by many. Most suggested **“don’t do it”**.

When a Rabbi on Rosh HaShanah, day of Creation of the world, cannot even speak to his congregation about our Mitzvah to care for this world!... we are in a bad place! **We Have a Problem!**

Talmud says: (Eruvin 13b) “For 3 years the school of Rabbi Shammai and the School of Rabbi Hillel argued...” They disagreed on legal matters; on religious issues; on practices and opinions – their strong arguments occupy many pages in our Holy Books!

But Talmud continues, making two points:

1. “They still married each other, joined each other’s family” - found ways to accept, by-pass, or overlook the other’s “wrong ways”, and lived together, fully engaging with each other.
2. Hillel’s School chosen by Tradition: Why? “Because they carefully studied the opposing opinions of Shammai, and when asked on any matter, they would first teach their opponents’ views, and only then their own views.”

Let’s be clear: They strongly and firmly rejected the other’s ideas, attitudes, behaviors, and decisions (we have hundreds of pages on that!), **but they did not reject their persons, didn’t dismiss them, kept valuing them as part of their community, even as part of their own families!**

Yom Kippur is actually called in Hebrew **Yom HaDin** -“*The Day of Judgement*”. **This is a great idea:** we go about our business all year, busy with our routines, so it’s good to take One day to judge how we are doing. This is helpful, when it is **One Day of Judgement a year - 1 in 365.**

But now, every day is a day of judgement! Every tweet, and every post, every opinion is full of judgement, every sermon is a judgement on someone – and even if it isn’t, it is still heard by people as a judgement on someone!

We judge each other so much when we disagree, that there are fewer and fewer “safe-subjects” we can talk about at Thanksgiving dinner without ending in a fight. We’re down to only food, weather, and perhaps football. Unless some of you are Vegan – then you don’t even dare to talk about food either!

So – this year, on Yom Kippur, **let's do something NEW**: now that we have 364 days of judgement... **Let's have One Day of Non-Judgement!!**

Imagine that: One full day in which we won't judge anybody for their "bad ideas", we won't condemn them for the many "wrong things" they say. Where we won't wish they'd go away, where we actively look for and find their good sides. Would you take this challenge? One day where we suppress the reflex to see it all in terms of "Us v. Them" – and instead think of everyone as "one of us too!"

The original Rabbi Hillel himself is actually known for this saying: "do not judge your fellow, until you come to be in their place". (*Avot 2:5*)

Only after you've lived their experience, you can judge them. **But...**

Can we ever truly "be in someone else's place?"

- Can anyone from outside really know what it is to grow up in the hood, have an incarcerated father, to live in multi-generational poverty, having crime and addiction all around you?
- Can anyone who has never been stereotyped or mocked or singled out for their ethnic origin or religion truly understand the Jewish sensitivities and anxieties on anything that even resembles antisemitism?
- Can anyone from outside really know what growing up in the Rust Belt feels like? What it is to see factories and jobs disappear, to see your beloved family and community left behind while the stock market hits record highs, and everyone celebrates "the great economy!"?
- Can anyone say: I know what it is to live threatened by gangs and subsistence poverty, and see that the only way to give my child a decent shot at life is to go North and try to sneak in the US anyway I can?
- Can anyone say: "I know, I had that experience, so I can judge your bad 'choices'"?

Our Rabbis taught: המקבל פני חבירו מקבל פני השכינה - "When you welcome another person, you are welcoming the Divine Presence!" (*Jer Talmud Eruvin 5 -1*)

We've forgotten that a person is precious, and it is not reduced just to *a wrong view, a bad attitude, a problem we can delete or cancel.*

Quoting Dr Seuss, "A Person is a person!" A person just like you, like your child, a unique creation – worthy of being called "in God's image"!

Over the past two years I met regularly with a diverse group of clergy, and other community leaders, as we organize to engage with the issues that affect our families, and our communities, to try to make a difference together.

One of my colleagues and friend, pastor in a Raleigh church, was sharing how hard it is when in his church he talks about 'equality, fairness, social justice, caring for the plight of others around us'... "people's guards come up, they quickly become resistant, reactionary, they rather not listen but reply and critique." Most clergy in our group had similar experiences.

It was with him and his congregation that we gathered for a potluck 2 weeks ago at BeSH – there were two churches and one synagogue in the same room. We had people from Raleigh/Cary, urban/suburban, Christian/Jew, black/white, multigender, multiethnic... We all gathered and spend a couple of hours eating together, and talking to each other.

The day after that the Pastor wrote to me, sharing his thoughts again:

Having those conversations about our values and social realities has "often been a real pain! But, "coming together on Sunday, people got a picture of *what a bigger version of We* looks like -- realizing that each of our small self-interests CAN overlap -- and that EVEN WHEN THEY DON'T, once we know one another, we're also willing to work on one another's interests. So yeah, it was really good for us - kind of an "aha moment" for several of our most guarded cases."

Can you see *the long line*? **There is a Line, a long Tradition**, running thru from Hillel-Shammai, through the Talmud and its famously endless disagreements and debates, ... down to our social hall and our neighboring friends: we are joined by **this** tradition – the tradition where

- * We Disagree with an opinion, but don't judge the person who has it
- * We argue and frankly reject ideas, but we still honor the person who has them.
- * We give others the benefit of the doubt – *who knows how you'd feel if you had their upbringing and their experiences?*
- * In our space, as we eat and talk and meet, there's no more "Us v. Them", there is just "many of US", "a great diversity of US"!
- * We commit to always see - beyond labels, divides, and differences- that there is a person, who is just as valuable as we are.

Isaiah, Micah, Israel's prophets all had a vision that "**the day will come**" "**BaYom HaHu**" – as we'll sing now in *Aleinu* prayer. **On that day**, "nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer take up the sword against another, nor will they train anymore for war. Each person will sit under their vine and under their fig tree, with nothing to be afraid of." (*Micah 4*)

As we sing in our prayers *Aleinu* – *BaYom HaHu* – we still hope for "that day to come" where we can sit with each other in our backyards and in our porches, with no fears or anxieties, despite all our differences.

While we hope for That Big Day to come – let's start small: let's start ourselves bringing that day – today, through Yom Kipur. Let's start, now, a day, in which we don't judge, but try to understand;

in which we don't shun and label, but try to stand in the other's shoes for a while;
a day in which we passionately disagree, and argue, but never forget that there aren't any "Them", as everyone is "one of Us" – in our image, and in God's image.

**May we all have a peaceful and inspiring
NOT Yom HaDin – A Day of Non-Judgement.**