

Sticks and Stones: Learning to Argue with Humility and Respect

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Rabbi Stephen Weiss

B'nai Jeshurun Congregation, Pepper Pike OH

There are words swirling around these days that we have unleashed in the past several months, words that continue to tear apart people that we care about and continue to tear us apart as a community. Words like kapo and warmonger. Words like Chamberlain, traitor and dual loyalty. Words like undue foreign influence and moneyed lobbies. Words that imply more than just that the other person is wrong. They imply that the other person has malicious motives, that they are cowards, or stooges or – worse – that they are the enemy.

These words were bandied about as we debated the merits of the Iran agreement. They took the place of real substantive arguments pro or con. Oh, there were real arguments to be made on both sides. The agreement is complicated, as are the political realities, and there was much worthy of careful examination. But it became easier to lash out at the other side in all too memorable emotional outbursts designed to sway people to take a side in what increasingly felt like a winner take all battle, a zero sum game in which the only choice was to win or lose.

As children, we learned the adage: Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.

But names do hurt. It is among the first lessons we teach our children as Jews. As it says in the Book of Proverbs: Life and death are in the power of the tongue. Words have the power to break down and to build up, to hurt and to heal, to divide and to unite. What's more, the impact of our words outlives the moment we speak them, traveling upon the lips and ears of others, irretrievable, spreading like a cancer that damages body and soul.

There is nothing wrong with our disagreeing on the issues of the day. God knows, Jews will always disagree. As they say, two Jews three opinions. You all know that I have strong opinions regarding the Iran agreement, and I have argued forcefully for why I think the agreement is dangerous. I still feel that way, but that is not my topic tonight.

There is a famous Midrash on the creation story. Our sages taught: A flesh and blood king makes a mold and every coin that is cast from it is identical. Not so the king of kings. He makes a mold – Adam – and every individual who comes from it is unique. This does not just mean physically, though it means that too. It means each of us look at the world differently, have different beliefs, perspectives and opinions.

In one of his novels, the late Alan Paton has one of his characters say: "When I shall ascend to heaven, which I certainly intend to do, I will be asked, 'Where are your wounds?' When I will say, 'I haven't any,' I will be asked, 'Was there nothing worth fighting for?' and that is a question I do not want to answer."

I hope for each of us that when we get to heaven we have wounds to show, that in life we find the things that we believe in our heart are worth fighting for, and that among them are the future vitality of Israel and the Jewish people.

No, it is not the debate that is the problem, nor even the volume of the debate. The problem has been the debate's tone. When we make our case by deriding and demeaning those on the other side, we do damage to our own cause as well as to our opponents. Most of all we damage our collective selves, we damage the Jewish people.

These vicious attacks we have witnessed – and all too often participated in -- weaken our claim to be right because the very fact that we choose to lash out implies that we do not have a solid rational basis for our position. We do, but as long as we are yelling at each other – yelling past each other – the other side will never hear us.

These attacks cause the other person to lose their own sense of worth. We send a message that they are not important to us, not a valued part of us, and in doing so we drive them away. These attacks drive us apart, splintering us and weakening us as a people. And words that have deeply divided us and inflicted wounds that will not quickly heal.

The sages teach us that leprosy in the Bible is a punishment for *lashon hara* – evil speech. We often say it is a punishment for all forms of *lashon hara* including gossip and tale-bearing. But through their word play the sages link leprosy to a very specific form of *lashon hara*. They say that the word *metzora* – leper – is an abbreviation for *motzi shem ra* – to say things that give someone a bad name, that is, that damage their reputation. That's the kind of *lashon hara* we are talking when we engage in these attacks.

The sages ask: Why is it that the leper is required to live outside the camp? Their answer: The leper caused the victim of their evil speech to be cut off from the community, so they should experience what it is like to be cut off from the community.

This is my greatest concern: That when we attack each other in this way we are saying to each other, you are outside the bounds within which I define Jewish community.

I worry about that because it is hurtful. Because it tears us apart. Over time such vitriol causes family members to stop seeing each other as family, to distance themselves from each other and allow walls of callousness to be erected between them.

I worry too because in the end, whether we acknowledge it or not, we need each other. Rabbi Brad Artson – of the American Jewish University's Ziegler Rabbinical School – teaches a beautiful piece of Torah in which he addresses our need for each other.

He asks: Why is it that the Torah was given at Mount Sinai and not before, in the wilderness, or after, when we arrived in the land of Israel. He points out that before the revelation, the Torah states: *Vayisu me-refidim* – “and they [in the plural] traveled from Refidim,” *vayavo'u midbar Sinai* – “and they [plural] came to the wilderness of Sinai,” *vayichanu bamidbar* – “and they [plural] encamped in the wilderness.”

But then right before the revelation, we suddenly read a shift in the grammatical structure in the text. The Torah says: *vayichan sham Yisrael neged hahar*. *Vayichan*: and this is a difficult word to translate. We want to say “And they encamped opposite the mountain,” except

vayichan is not in the plural, it is in the singular. “And then *it* encamped – or he or she – meaning the people as a collective, as *one unit*.”

–Rashi notices this shift in tense and comments *k’ish echad b’lev echad* – they camped as one person with one heart. That is, in total unity. We merited receiving Torah when this rag-tag group of individual slaves finally became united as one people with one shared sense of destiny and purpose. *K’ish echad b’lev echad*. This, says Rabbi Artson, is what made it possible for us to receive God’s revelation. An individual cannot receive the fullness of revelation, we can only receive it together.

The irony is that as divided as we have been over the Iran agreement, we in fact are pretty much all in agreement when it comes to what the next steps must be now: Healing the relationship between Israel and the US, limiting Iran’s ability to spread terror and increase its foothold in the region, vigorously seek to hold Iran to the terms of the agreement, seeking to verify compliance, stronger military and intelligence cooperation with and support for Israel, a carefully developed joint US-Israel plan for the appropriate responses if and when Iran breaks or walks away from the agreement, including keeping the military option on the table as a last resort. Despite our differences on the actual Iran Agreement, on these points we almost all agree. But only if we are united can we play a role in ensuring these steps happen.

What’s more, as a people we face many serious threats. Iran is only one of them: others include the rising tide of anti-Semitism, especially in Europe, the BDS movement, possible action in the ICC and general efforts to undermine Israel’s legitimacy, the ongoing threats from terror, the threats of intermarriage and assimilation, and a weakening of connection to Israel among the younger generation. How will we deal with these issues if we cannot approach them as one unified people?

In Pirke Avot, we learn that an argument that is for the sake of heaven will stand forever. That is, it will endure because it has value. The sages give us an example of such a dispute, namely those between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. What made their disputes qualify as “for the sake of heaven?” Despite their differences they still sat down at the same table to eat together and they still married their children to each other.

Similarly, Rabbi Yochanan and his son-in-law Resh Lakish were study partners. They fought vociferously over every point of Jewish law. When Resh Lakish died, Rabbi Yochanan’s new study partner never disagreed about anything. This constant agreement upset Rabbi Yochanan so much that he complained. He said: “In the old days, everything I would say Reish Lakish would challenge with 24 questions -- and I would counter with 24 answers -- This scholar, however, brings proofs for everything I say!”

The Jewish view of truth is more complex than the western view. As westerners we are trained to think there can only be one right answer. The Jewish view of truth is more like the Chinese symbol for ying and yang, where a little bit of each is found in the other. A thing and its opposite can simultaneously be true, and their truth is best understood when they are looked at together.

To reach the truth, we have to listen to each other, respect each other, and learn from each other. We can present our own truths passionately, but we must also speak them with humility. If we don't, not only do we inflict great hurt, we just become stuck ... like the Zax. You remember the Zax:

One day, making tracks In the prairie of Prax, Came a North-Going Zax And a south-going Zax.

And it happened that both of them came to a place where they bumped.

There they stood. Foot to foot. Face to face.

"Look here, now!" the North-Going Zax said. "I say! You are blocking my path. You are right in my way. I'm a North-Going Zax and I always go north. Get out of my way, now, and let me go forth!"

"Who's in whose way?" snapped the South-Going Zax. "I always go south, making south going tracks. So you're in MY way! And I ask you to move and let me go south in my south going groove."

Then the North-Going Zax puffed his chest up with pride. "I never," he said, "take a step to one side. And I'll prove to you that I won't change my ways if I have to keep standing here fifty-nine days!"

"And I'll prove to YOU" yelled the South-Going Zax, "That I can stand here in the prairie of Prax for fifty-nine years! For I live by a rule that I learned as a boy back in South-Going school. Never budge! That's my rule. Never budge in the least! Not an inch to the west! Not an inch to the east! I'll stay here, not budging! I can and I will if it makes you and me and the whole world stand still!"

Well... Of course the world didn't stand still. The world grew. In a couple of years, the new highway came through. And they built it right over those two stubborn Zax And left them there, standing un-budged in their tracks. (*Dr. Seuss*)

That's what happens when we are not one. When we are locked in unending battle with each other. The world does not wait for us to solve our differences. It passes us by. And when it does, in the end, we all lose. Israel loses. The Jewish people lose.

So let's pledge this Yom Kippur not to be a stubborn, closed-minded Zax. No more sticks and stones, no more name calling. Let us encamp together as one, with one heart. Let us seek to heal from the hurts of this past summer, to apologize and to forgive, to learn to advocate with passion but also with humility, to listen and seek to understand the other's perspective before we speak, to recognize there is truth in all sides of a disagreement, and that when I incorporate your truth into mine, we both come out ahead. Let us pledge to work together with mutual respect to address the many vital issues that lie before us, so that we can together work to ensure the future of Israel and the Jewish people.