

“Talk Less – Listen More”
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ONCE UPON A TIME, a new rabbi comes to a community where, unfortunately, there is a controversy: they’re having an argument between those who feel that they should stand when they recite the Shema, and those who think that they should sit.

It’s become quite bitter, and so they turn to the new rabbi to ask her what they should do. She thinks about it for a while and she says, well, before giving you an answer, I’d like to know, *what was the original practice of the shul?* What did you used to do about this?

At this point, everyone agrees: the rabbi should go off and talk with the undisputed elder of the shul, who remembers everything about the shul’s early days. She should go talk to him to find out. So, she heads off and finds him and has a chat, and they finally get around to the reason for her call: “Tell me,” she says, “with respect to the saying of the Shema, what did you used to do in the early days of the shul? Did you stand or did you sit?”

“Did we stand, or did we sit?” the old man says, half to himself, half out loud.

“What did we used to do?” he asks. “I will tell you what we used to do: We used to argue about it!”

¹ This sermon arose out of a seminar I took with Dr. Christine Hayes at the Hartman Institute during the summer of 2020. I would like to thank my colleagues, Rabbis Daniel Pressman and Rob Scheinberg, as well for their generosity, collegiality and very helpful contributions.



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Yes, we Jews do have a well-deserved reputation for arguing.

My sense is that sometimes we enjoy it. But sometimes we don't.

If we get into an argument over sports, that's one thing. Even if we don't follow the teams that closely, we don't necessarily feel uncomfortable expressing our opinions. If someone says, "You don't know what you're talking about," it doesn't bother us. It's not a *personal* insult. Everyone (– or no one --) is an expert when it comes to sports.

But do we really want to have an argument over ideas, beliefs, or politics? In the America, in the world, that we are living in today? As we know, things can become very dicey very quickly.

If, say, we're at a family get-together, and someone brings up politics, it can really put a damper on things. We're often in a quandary: do we engage, or do we refrain from engaging? If someone says something provocative, do we try to set the record straight? Or do we try to change the subject?

It's hard to get into such discussions. They're examples of what's called in the literature, "difficult conversations."² That's the title of a now classic book authored by a team from the Harvard Negotiation Project that analyzes why some conversations are so challenging.

For one thing, that book tells us, two people having an argument don't usually agree on the **facts**. Each one thinks he or she knows exactly what happened. There are other issues that can cause us to stumble when we're arguing with someone. It's easy to think that we know exactly what the other person

² See: *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project (Penguin, 1999).

intends, what *motivates* him or her, what they really are about—even though, we could be totally wrong. Finally, of course, we think we’re right and the other person is wrong! That too makes it hard to have a conversation.

Are there ways of overcoming these obstacles? Sure, but it takes training, effort and time.

A few years ago, I went with a member of our congregation to a very instructive session conducted by **Resetting the Table**, an organization that seeks to help American Jews speak with one another about touchy subjects—in particular, the Arab-Israeli conflict. With the help of funding from Combined Jewish Philanthropies, we later brought these sessions to our congregation. We learned some important principles.

First, to paraphrase Aaron Burr—at least, as he is depicted in “*Hamilton*,” “**Talk Less. Listen More.**”³ Now, most of us *think* we are good at listening, because, when we’re arguing with someone, we may try to listen closely to what the other person is saying—because we can’t wait to tell them how wrong they are.

But in a difficult conversation, the goals are, or should be, different. What’s necessary is to listen for the sake of **learning**, not for the sake of **refuting**. We have to try to *listen*, in order to learn what it is that is *motivating* the other person, *bothering* the other person, *worrying* the other person. What do they value? What are their priorities?

At that Resetting the Table seminar, we took part in a very interesting exercise: We paired up and took sides in an imaginary debate. Our first responsibility was to listen to the person on the other side of the debate, and then to try as best we could to express *that person’s perspective*, in front of the entire group. And who was the judge as to how successful we were? *The other person*. We had to convince, not the audience, but *the other person*, that we

³ The libretto of *Hamilton* reads, “Talk less – smile more.”

really understood them, that we really understood where “they were coming from.”

That was such an important exercise, because, believe me, listening empathically doesn’t come naturally. It takes effort, commitment, perseverance.

The payoff, though, we discovered, was **big**. Once each party to the conversation had convinced the other that they understood where the other one was coming from, the ensuing conversation went much more easily than anticipated. Having *listened*, both parties were then able to *hear* one another. It naturally moderated the views and refined the way that they were expressed. The volume and tone of the discourse remained tolerable.

No people were harmed in the making of those arguments.

It may seem odd that the road to a better argument is listening to and voicing empathically the views of those with whom we’re arguing.

But that may be because, over the last few years, we’ve been led to believe that we *shouldn’t* have empathy for those with whom we disagree.

That perspective reflects a **Manichaen world-view**. Manichaeism was a dualistic faith that arose in Persia in the fourth century. It followed the teachings of the prophet Mani. (Incidentally, growing up, I had an Uncle Manny; no relation.) Manichaeism believed that there was **Good** on one side and **Evil** on the other, and very little gray in between. If you’re a Manichaen, the world is a battleground between the forces of good and the forces of evil.

If we truly believe that we have the absolute truth, then everyone who doesn’t accept our truth is *of the devil*. If I believe that my opponent is not just uninformed, or mistaken, or even wrong, but that he and his ideas are *Satanic* – well, then, discourse is impossible, and my mission must be to suppress his

ideas and to destroy him. Needless to say, the idea of befriending him is out of the question.

But the Jewish tradition – our tradition -- has always taken a different stance on this.

Rabbi Yochanan and **Resh Lakish** were two rabbis who lived in the Land of Israel almost two thousand years ago. Though they differed on many halachic or Jewish legal issues, they were study partners and very good friends, until they had a falling out. Before they had a chance to reconcile, Resh Lakish grew ill and passed away from his illness. Rabbi Yochanan was inconsolable. He tried to come back to the Beit Midrash, the study hall, but he couldn't without his old friend, Resh Lakish. It just wasn't the same. The other sages decided that someone else should serve as Rabbi Yochanan's new study partner. They chose the finest remaining scholar for that esteemed role.

Finally, Rabbi Yochanan returned to the study hall. He sat down with his new study partner, and they studied together. Whenever Rabbi Yochanan would say something, his new partner would lend support to his opinion. This continued for some time.

Finally, Rabbi Yochanan couldn't take it any more. He said to his new study partner: "Do you think you are at all like my friend Resh Lakish? Whenever I would say anything, Resh Lakish used to raise 24 objections, and I would have to respond with 24 rebuttals. **All you do is agree with me! What's the use of that?**" And Rabbi Yochanan stood up, cut *kriyah*, tore his garments and wept for the memory of his beloved friend.

Now, that's a powerful story that we could unpack and discuss on many different levels.

[For one thing, reading this story on the eve of Yom Kippur is a reminder of how urgent is the work of atonement. Resh Lakish died before he and Rabbi Yochanan could reconcile. What a tragedy! None of us lives forever. If we

don't want what happened to them to happen to us, we should not put off the work of reconciliation.]

For our purposes, think what the story says about the difference between **disagreeing** with someone and **demonizing** him. Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan were the strongest of ideological opponents yet they were the best of friends. Neither wanted to live and work in an echo chamber. Each valued the fresh ideas and perspectives of his *ba'al plugta*, his ideological opponent.

People who disagree can *strengthen* each other and *be strengthened by* each other. So long as it is conducted respectfully and constructively, we needn't—we shouldn't—fear disagreement and disputation.

As Americans, that story of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish should be familiar to us. It wasn't that long ago that one great American legal thinker said of another: "He was a person of captivating brilliance and wit, with a rare talent to make even the most sober [colleague] laugh. ... It was my great good fortune to have known him as working colleague and treasured friend." Yes, that was the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg eulogizing Justice Antonin Scalia, after his untimely death in 2016. The two disagreed on *so many issues*, and yet they were the best of friends. How is it, Justice Scalia was once asked, that he could be friends with Ginsburg—when they disagreed on EVERYTHING? The answer he gave was, "I attack ideas, I don't attack people."

We live, it may seem, in a different world today. Today, attacking people has become commonplace. Today, the notion that one could have a peaceful interpersonal relationship with someone with whom one has vehement disagreements seems implausible.

So what are we to do? Shall we give in to the "new morality" of personal attacks and character assassination? Should our standard of effective leadership be reality show ratings? Shall we dispense with civility?

There are those who believe that. I will never forget a conversation I once had in my office with someone who told me that “civility is for *wusses*.” He went on to say: “It’s” -- and I find it hard to repeat this, I find it so offensive, but I I think it’s important to hear how some people think: “It’s a **feminine** virtue.”

Well, from my perspective, it’s a feminine virtue that all of us, whatever our gender, should be proud to adopt.

There are others today who decry civility as a matter of principle from the other direction. In an article entitled, “*I Don’t Owe You My Tolerance: How ‘Civil Discourse’ Functions to Uphold Systems of Oppression*,” Devontae Torriente, a young social justice activist, says that, “It’s time for us to do away with the idea that we must be respectful or courteous to be entitled to our rights. I don’t owe you my tolerance, especially not when my life is at stake.” Well, I agree with that last statement. One doesn’t have to be respectful or courteous to be entitled to one’s rights. They are inalienable. But isn’t it **moral** as well as **wise** and **prudent** to be civil? I think so. To step away from that is, I think, to step into the abyss.

I’ll never forget -- and I urge anyone who hasn’t seen this to watch it -- James Baldwin confronting philosopher Paul Weiss in an appearance on the Dick Cavett show many years ago, in 1969. It’s a priceless three minute investment of your time: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZQQ7o16yQ>.⁴

That confrontation was impassioned, and even provocative. *But it was not uncivil*. It didn’t need to be.

I don’t think it **ever** needs to be. And it shouldn’t be—if the purpose is to be constructive. As Rav Salanter, the great Jewish ethicist once wrote, “We should show respect to all—especially those with whom we disagree.”

⁴ After watching the three minute clip above, I highly recommend watching the full 17-minute segment here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWwOi17WHpE>.

As Jews, we know this – or we should know it. It goes back to the great, gentle scholar and teacher of whom I hope most of us have heard, **Hillel**. Hillel was known for his great learning, but he is best remembered because of his patience and forbearance at responding to impudent, irritating questions. Even when someone set out to get him angry, he managed to resist temptation and remain civil. He knew how to be a respectful, effective arguer.⁵

You know who else knew? **Fred Rogers**. Fred Rogers had an uncanny ability to listen empathically, to understand, and to communicate effectively. If you take a look at the recent documentary film about him, you'll see how he managed to convince someone who was not at all inclined to support him, to turn 180 degrees.⁶ How did he do it? By speaking to the person's **heart**, not to his **head**.

It's been three years since we brought **Setting the Table** here to our congregation. I think it's time to have them join us again.

Also, I hope in the fall to teach some Jewish texts that further explore dispute resolution and civil discourse in the Jewish tradition.

When I discussed with a colleague my interest in speaking about civility in speech and discourse, she tried to discourage me, saying: The crisis we're in now won't be solved by civility. Don't waste your breath mouthing platitudes.

⁵ Our tradition understands that spirit of mutual respect and collegiality to have continued throughout the generations. As the Talmud records, despite their ideological differences, the schools of Hillel and Shammai maintained mutually respectful and friendly relations: "They practiced affection and camaraderie between them, to fulfill that which is stated: *'Love truth and peace'* (Zechariah 8:19)." (b.Yevamot 14b)

⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKy7ljRr0AA> for the full testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Communications on May 1, 1969. (6:50)

That's a serious critique. Have things gotten so bad that we should stop focusing on how we're talking to one another?

I don't think so. I think it's as important as ever. As John Adams wrote in 1776: "There is one thing ... that must be attempted and most sacredly observed, or we are all undone. There must be decency and respect and veneration introduced for persons of every rank, or we are undone. In popular government, this is our only way."

Just yesterday, we read in the Torah that the Torah itself is referred to as a song.

Why is that? Rabbi Yehiel Michel Epstein, one of the great sages of the 19th century Lithuanian Jewish community, gave an explanation. He said that "The Torah is like a song, because just as a song is made most beautiful—when people are singing in harmony—singing different notes and different lines, but in a well-coordinated manner—so too the Torah is most beautiful not when everyone understands it in exactly the same way, but when different people hold a variety of interpretations. **The Torah is most beautiful when people disagree about it.**"

Of course, disagreements can resemble a cacophony of yelling and screaming and even, God forbid, acts of violence. Or, they can resemble a beautiful piece of music.

Which is it going to be?

We should extend ourselves and communicate—respectfully and forthrightly—with those with whom we disagree. There's no better place to start than with those closest to us, in our own community. And there's no better time to think about doing that than on this day, the Day of Atonement.

To paraphrase our *mahzor*, “*Ne’aseh kulanu agudah achat la’asot r’tzono belevav shalom.*” May all of us one day be bound together in one bond to fulfill the divine will wholeheartedly.

Amen.