

What a Marriage Counsellor Would Advise a Divided Nation

There is so much division and polarization in our country these days, I have come to the conclusion that what our nation needs at this time more than anything else is some good old-fashioned marriage counselling.

The disagreements are numerous and contentious. The divisions and fissures are intense, dominating every dimension of our lives. We cannot find consensus on anything, mainly because there is no desire to do so. The arguments are no longer respectful discourse about alternative approaches to complex problems, but highly charged emotional visceral with no attempt to see any redeeming qualities in those with whom we disagree.

And so we shout in our echo chambers: “Take down the statues/Keep the statues up; Repeal and replace/universal health care for all; Black Lives Matter/Blue lives matter/All lives matter/No lives matter.” We cannot even agree anymore on what constitutes and defines anti-Semitism.

Our country has become so toxic it reminds me of the bickering dysfunctional couple who is always fighting. One day a cantankerous husband calls and asks his wife what she is making for dinner. She replies, “What do you think I am making? Poison. That’s what I’m making.” The husband replies, “Fine. In that case, make just one portion. I’m not coming home tonight.”

Things are so politicized the non-Orthodox movements decided not to initiate what has become an annual perfunctory High Holiday call with the president. Some in our community applauded the decision, while others felt it was disrespectful and imprudent to offend and cut off access to the White House.

In this highly charged climate, it is no wonder that rabbis across the country have agonized this year more so than in previous years over whether or not they should address these matters on the holidays, especially since discussion of these issues could potentially alienate portions of one’s congregation. A number of members of our synagogue have asked me in recent weeks if I would be addressing the current political situation on the holidays.

It reflects the respect and esteem people have for their rabbis that congregants want to know what their spiritual leaders think about what is happening in the world and in our nation to help them form their own perspective. But while many congregants want to hear what their rabbi has to say about current issues, there may be those who do not. And there are many who don’t care what the rabbi says or talks about in the sermon-- as long as they can get in a good nap.

In truth, I think what most people really want to hear from their religious leaders is validation of their own preconceived notions, as in the old saying – If I want to know your opinion, I’ll give it to you.

If a rabbi expresses an opinion people agree with, he or she is considered wise, scholarly, thoughtful and courageous. When however, the same rabbi takes a position contrary to the same

person's beliefs, that very same rabbi is suddenly inane, incompetent and inept, and besides, they will say -- what right does he have to take a stand on controversial issues anyway.

As leaders whose moral assessment is sought-after because of our familiarity with Jewish teachings, rabbis have a responsibility to offer guidance and leadership. Yet this is not as easy as it sounds, because authentic Jewish sources can be cited in support of or in opposition to a variety of issues and causes.

Part of the challenge also has to do with different views on the nature of the role. Are rabbis supposed to function like the ancient priests or should they act more like biblical prophets? Those who see rabbis as heirs to the mantle of prophetic leadership are disappointed when rabbis do not speak out against injustice in society. Those who feel that rabbis should serve a priestly role want them to focus on the spiritual aspect of the role and do not want them to discuss politics.

Who is right?

One reason I would not make a good politician or elected official is because too often I see both sides of an issue. I identify with the classic response in the opening scene of "Fiddler on the Roof" where the rabbi tells one disputant he is right, and then a moment later sides with the other litigant telling him he is right. When a third party correctly asks how can they both be right, the rabbi says, "You also are correct."

To those who say it is imperative rabbis take a side on political disputes, and those who say it is equally imperative that rabbis not do so, guess what? They both are right!

One of the first steps in marriage therapy is to get both of the parties to recognize there is a problem and to help them recognize that they might both be a little bit right and they may both share part of the blame and both be at fault.

If any one thing is clear after the last election it is that we do not know each other. As J.D. Vance's groundbreaking book, "Hillbilly Elegy" makes amply clear, urban, suburban America and rural America live in parallel worlds. Middle America and the coasts do not talk to each other, nor do they know or understand the concerns that cause the anxiety felt by each. Despair about economic insecurity is widespread as the income gap between haves and have-nots is widening. We are unaware of the fears the other feels. Our children are born into a very different society with very different opportunities and expectations than those of Middle America. People are pitted against each other in a zero sum game, each viewing the other side with suspicion and as an adversary, with no interest in seeking to find common ground. Since they only know the opposition through selective superficial stereotypes fed to them by a self-serving media, each blames the other side for all of their problems, causing a perpetual no-win situation where neither hears the other and neither is willing to compromise.

We have become like the husband who comes and tells his rabbi that he and his wife are having troubles and are drifting apart. The rabbi asks him to tell him something about their relationship

so he can help. The guy says, “I can’t figure out why our marriage is such a mess. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for my wife, and nothing she wouldn’t do for me. In fact, there’s nothing we do for each other!”

This describes our current state of affairs, which obviously is not a healthy situation, or positive place to be, which is why I have suggested marriage counselling for our country.

Once there is recognition that the situation needs to change, and there is a willingness to seek help and reconciliation, the therapist seeks to identify the core issues. The immediate goal is to get each side to express what they feel so that the other side hears what the other is feeling. This hopefully fosters greater understanding, which both leads to better behavior and begins to get at the root cause or causes of the problem.

The Talmud says we should strive to be like Moses’ brother Aaron, seeking peace between husband and wife. So while some rabbis may speak on this holiday about the president or specific policies, I am going to try to be like Aaron. In other words, a marriage counsellor. We should act like Aaron and also our sage Hillel, who respected and always sought to understand the thinking of his nemesis, Shammai.

Without getting into specifics or taking sides, for a therapist needs to remain objective, the most recent election is a barometer of the differences we are experiencing and troubles we are having.

A substantial portion of the populace was so disenchanted with the direction of our country they chose to vote for Donald Trump and elect him as president. And a significant number are disenchanted now because Donald Trump was elected president.

Regardless of how you feel about him, I think one thing we can all agree on -- We have never had a president like this one before.

I think it would be helpful for those who are concerned about the direction of the country under President Trump to try to understand his supporters and what motivates them, and vice versa.

Many of those who voted for him felt he understood their frustrations with politicians who have ignored them and their needs, or worse, taken them for granted. They are fed up with a system, economy and programs that do not address their needs and which they feel have left them behind. They are perturbed by the hypocrisy and double standard applied to him and contend that the media is unfair and unrelenting in its criticism of him. They point out that some of the very things said or done by President Trump which are the focus of negative comments in the media were also said or done by President Obama or either or both of the Clintons.

There are those in the Jewish community who like Trump simply because he is not Barack Obama. They are upset that Trump gets lambasted for the support he receives from white supremacists and the right-wing news source Breitbart, while Obama got a free pass for his embrace of Israel-hater Linda Sarsour and the Muslim fencing champion who has written hateful things about Jews and Israel and was invited to the White House. They contrast the warm positive feelings Trump

has towards Israel with Obama, who made no secret of his contempt for Netanyahu and who refused to recognize terrorist attacks such as the one at the kosher deli in Paris as motivated by anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism.

On the other hand, those who are Trump loyalists need to understand that his character, misogyny, lack of experience, hypocrisy, taunts of those who disagree with him, his disregard for ethical standards and conflicts of interest all call in to question his fitness for the nation's highest office. While observant Jews work for him and he is proud to have Jewish grandchildren, he has undeniably appealed to and attracted anti-Semites in a number of not so subtle ways. The way he speaks about Mexicans, Muslims, minorities, immigrants and women is troubling. His critics worry about the stability and potential danger someone who is so insecure, self-centered and narcissistic, who is vindictive towards those who wrong him, not to mention the unusual cozying up to Russia and Putin, can do in his position.

I cannot include everything expressed by each side, and there obviously is much I am omitting. His supporters may say I said too little in his defense and his detractors may feel I said too much. In fact, I actually may have just succeeded in bringing people together and uniting the congregation by making everyone upset with me. As I said earlier, it most likely will depend on one's previously held position.

I sincerely hope I did not upset either side because that is not my intention. My point this morning is not to convince one side or the other of the president's fitness for office or to evaluate or pass judgment on the president, nor to discuss politics. My intent is not to express an opinion on any specific policies, proposals, political figure or political matters. In the rabbi's role as part prophet, part priest, part marriage counsellor, and also as defined by our Talmudic sages, teacher, my goal is to encourage us to turn down the temperature and seek to appreciate those with whom we disagree, and more importantly to see what we can learn from what is going on in our world today.

In that spirit I encourage you to listen and look at what you see and hear in the news and from commentators about our leaders and reflect upon what you can learn from what they say or do about how to act or how not to act.

At the end of the day, much as I wish it were otherwise, the truth is, my opinion and sermons will have little impact on the direction of the country. But maybe, just maybe it can have an impact on some who hear what I have to say.

After all, the primary theme of Rosh Hashana is to use this time to reflect on ourselves and on how we are living our lives. We are encouraged to focus on internal matters, such as - what are our faults, and what we should try to do differently in the coming year. Yom HaDin is when we look at ourselves in the mirror with a Jewish lens and think about how Judaism can influence and mold our character. What are the ways we should try to do better and be better people. The lofty goal of changing the world and making it a better place must begin with ourselves.

Aseret Y'mei Teshuva, the Ten Days of Repentance is a time to be introspective. To think not about how to judge others, but to ponder how we will be judged. To judge ourselves, to contemplate the virtues that should guide our interactions and how we should live our lives.

Therefore the message I hope you will take away from today is a central theme all would agree rabbis can and should discuss on the holiday – character.

Much of what Judaism urges us to focus on is in the area of Jewish law known as *Musar*, character and virtue. Many of the concepts of *Musar* are interrelated, interdependent, and shed light on the current state of affairs.

Honesty and integrity, for example are important Jewish virtues. George Burns summed it up best when he said – Integrity is the most important thing. If you can fake that, you've got it made.

Speaking of honesty and integrity could lead to discussion of the importance of truth as being the foundation of trust, which could lead to consideration of the attributes of loyalty and humility. Humility is associated with our greatest hero, Moses. Since he was a paragon of humility, it is seen as an especially important qualification for individuals in positions of leadership. Judaism has much to say about all of these topics, but instead of delving into or enumerating each and every character trait our sages held up as important, there is one concept which encapsulates the essence of how we are to treat others – *derekh erez*, proper conduct.

A famous midrash says, "*Derekh erez kadma laTorah* – *Derekh erez* precedes the Torah, implying that it was so fundamental it was given to the world even before the Torah. It means treating all people with respect and recognizing that each and every individual is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the Divine Image. It entails being considerate of the feelings of another person, to never want to embarrass or humiliate another person. The Talmud and other sources are replete with many examples of behavior we should try to emulate. In one place it instructs us to never enter another person's home suddenly, so as not to cause potential embarrassment to that individual. We are told that even the Holy One, God must respect this principle.

A corollary of the concept of *derekh erez* is speech. The Jewish Virtual Library notes, "Judaism is intensely aware of the power of speech and of the harm that can be done through speech." How we speak to and about others is an area of great concern to Jewish ethics and ethicists. Of the 43 sins enumerated in the *Al Chet* confession recited on Yom Kippur, 11 are sins committed through speech. Gossip, tale-bearing, speaking ill of others, spreading false rumors, are all addressed extensively in various tractates of the Talmud and later Jewish codes of law. We are instructed not to mock, bully, belittle or speak disparagingly of others, but to address people *bekavod*, with honor, for speech has the power to lift up or tear down.

Acting with *derekh erez* causes us to strive to be sensitive to the feelings of others and to consider the potential impact our words may have. As a result, by way of example, if someone had a family member who was convicted of a crime and was subsequently hung, you cannot say to the person, "Hang this fish up for me." The sensitivity also mandates that you may not belittle

another or call a person by an embarrassing nickname or derogatory name, adding -- even if he is used to it.

The reason we call this season, the Ten Days of Teshuva is because this is a time not to “double down” on things we have said or mistakes we have committed, but to have the humility to admit when we are wrong and at fault. None of us is perfect. We all have flaws. We all make mistakes and say and do things we regret and wish we could take back and amend.

That is why we are given these days -- to apologize, to seek forgiveness, and to grant forgiveness, all of which can lead to and allow for growth.

Every day offers us teachable moments when we can internalize and apply lessons to our lives. We can look at our world and what is going on around us through the lens of what our tradition teaches about how to act, and consider how to apply those lessons to our lives. Without referring to any particular political position or politician, clearly many of our public officials can learn a great deal from the concept of *derekh erez* as to how to act towards others and how to speak about and to others, and to think about the importance of admitting mistakes. More importantly, so can we.

This is a day not to focus on how others will be judged, but on judging ourselves. May we take advantage of this unique teachable moment in our nation’s history and strive to incorporate the principle of *derekh erez* into our lives, into how we act and speak, for the Talmud reminds us that the hallmark of our people, of Abraham and his descendants is that we act towards others with compassion, modesty and deeds of lovingkindness.

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