

Jewish Unity and Israel --- Kol Nidrei 5780

Jewish history and tradition is full of disagreements and arguments - from the comical to the catastrophic. We're very good at them. These can be strengthening - as in the case of study partners, havrutot arguing over the true meaning of a text, or destructive. The tradition blames the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem on senseless hatred between Jews. We are facing a challenging moment of Jewish division right now. We are well served by the wisdom of our tradition in dealing with current and upcoming conflicts.

In Judaism there is this idea of an argument for the sake of heaven, מְחֻלְקֵת לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, literally “In the name of heaven.” “In the name of heaven” meaning this isn't my thing or your thing, there's no ego about being right, it's not for my name or your name. Here is how argument in the name of heaven is introduced in the Mishnah, from sometime before the year 200. I will explain the examples.

משנה אבות ה':י"ז

אין סופה להתקיים. איזו היא מחלוקת, כָּל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, סופה להתקיים. וְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם
שֶׁהיא לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת הלל ושמאי. וְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זו מחלוקת קרח וְכָל עֲדָתוֹ

Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:17

Every argument that is for the name of heaven, it is destined to endure. But if it is not for [the name of] heaven-- it is not destined to endure. What is [an example of an argument] for [the name of] heaven? The argument of Rabbis Hillel and Shammai. What is [an example of an argument] not for [the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Korach and all of his congregation.

Not for the name of Heaven: Korach led a rebellion against Moses in the book of Numbers. Korach was a cousin of Moses and Aaron's a Levite who was not pleased that his cousins were so central and powerful. He makes a very appealing communitarian argument - that Moses and Aaron have made themselves authoritarian rulers when “all the people are holy.” This is seen as the model of a corrupt argument because while the rhetoric is compelling and appealing, Korach's real motivation was seeking more power for himself.

And what is our paradigm for an argument in Heaven's name? The great arguing rabbinic duo: Hillel and Shammai and their schools who disagreed on much about the proper way of Jewish practice. One of their most well known disagreements is on Hanukah lights. Shammai, for excellent reasons thought we should light eight the first night and decrease one candle per night. Hillel for excellent reasons suggested increasing each night. As in almost all cases of their dispute, the normative practice is according to Hillel. Here is a story from the Talmud - a commentary on the Mishnah.

ערובין י"ג:

אמר רבי אבא אמר שמואל שלש שנים נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל הללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו והללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו יצאה בת קול ואמרה "אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים" הן והלכה כבית הלל. וכי מאחר ש"אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים", מפני מה זכו בית הלל לקבוע הלכה? כמותן מפני שנוחין ועלובין היו ושונין דבריהן ודברי בית שמאי ולא עוד אלא שמקדימין דברי בית שמאי לדבריהן

Eruvin 13b:10-11*

Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years The School of Shammai and School of Hillel disagreed. One said: The *halakha* [proper Jewish practice] is in accordance with our opinion, and the other said: The *halakha* is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. And, the *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.

The Gemara asks: **Since both these and those are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the *halakha* established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and submissive. They would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements.**

* This translation by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz tries to convey both the meaning of the text and the sparse use of language in the Talmud text. Words in bold are the direct translation of what is in the Talmud. The non bolded texts are Rabbi Steinsaltz's interpretation of how these words and phrases should be understood. This translation of the Talmud (along with a massive collection of Jewish text and commentary) is available at Sefaria.org.

Back to our current age. A frightening statistic from a documentary on the US education system described US students' scores in comparison to those of other countries. We are shockingly mediocre on most measures of math and science. However, on one metric our students excel above the students from all other countries and that was in level of self-confidence. We believe we know more than we know. Overconfidence is a national crisis. This makes sense in the way our public discourse is both passionate and shallow. This has been the case for many years and it is getting worse.

And when there are high levels of ignorance and passion people are committed to positions they only partially understand. This is what a study partner is for. Someone who will push you to clarify and articulate your position, who argues with you as did the schools of Hillel and Shammai - *machloket l'shem shamayim* - argument for the sake of heaven. In our community we desperately need argument for the sake of heaven when talking about politics in general, and Israel in particular.

I realized I was going to talk about Israel this year when I saw a front page top of the fold story in the Jewish Journal about one of the Democratic presidential candidates, but it probably could

have been about any number of candidates because the headline was that this candidate wanted to “End the Occupation” as if that were a position that was particularly threatening to Israel. I wonder if readers of that article have the context that every US administration since 1967 has supported some version of “end the occupation?” This has been a consistent position of US administrations and a source of tension between the two countries - the conflict between the Reagan administration and that of Prime Minister Shamir is a good example.

Originally I had planned to talk this evening about Israel, and then realized what I really wanted to talk about was Jewish unity. First off, I know that “Jewish Unity,” while not an oxymoron, is unachievable until the messianic age. However, in our tradition perfect Justice and Peace are also unachievable but that does not mean we give up on pursuing them.

Israel was a challenging enough topic as it was. Now it is set up to become a wedge issue in the US presidential election. We have moved into a new realm of heated discord to have the State of Israel deny visas, with the US President’s encouragement, to Democratic members of the House of Representatives. In response to that dramatic decision, the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC), along with many other politicians and Jewish organizations immediately objected to the decision. And then the President suggested that Jews who voted Democratic - historically that’s close to 75% of us- were “disloyal.” I don’t want to digress into parsing what all that might mean. What it says to me is that we will be getting more and more divisive discourse directed at Jewish community for the purpose of political gain. And so, it is very important that we have the opportunity to do some learning together to help us cut through the rhetoric and ground us in a deeper understanding and connection to our values - individually and collectively.

Notice that the word *Community* includes the word *Unity*. Being part of a community or *kahalah*, does not mean we all agree, unity means we have a commitment to stick with each other or at least to keep the door open a crack rather than slamming it shut.

The unity and sense of inclusiveness of this community is extremely important. I am trying to help us maintain that in an honest way in a divisive world. As I stand here, *Kol Nidrei*, that’s when the room is full. Right? Well this year we were full a couple of other times as well, when more people came than we planned for. Most recently we celebrated the *bnot mitzvah* of twelve women in our community. For some this was the culmination of decades of study and growing connection to Jewish tradition. Family and friends came from all over the country to celebrate this shared achievement and celebration. And this room was also overflowing - with people and anguish on the First Friday night in November, the first Shabbat after the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. We sent an invitation out through the Clergy Association and by Friday morning we had 400 RSVPs. This community came together and provided the place where the community could come and mourn and show solidarity. It is challenging and

uncomfortable to talk about our disagreements. If you feel challenged or uncomfortable please know that I want us to be the strong loving community that was so evident here this year.

How do we understand Israel, and how do we understand our obligations to that place and the people living there - the diverse populations of Jews and Arabs - all the people living there?

There are many different stories available. You can get the story you want out of Israel, there are industries devoted to careful messaging in all flavors.

Probably fifteen years ago I was in Israel on an educator's trip. I called my Israeli friend Vered who grew up in Tel Aviv from the tour bus. On the bus, the teachers were singing some silly song at the top of their lungs, maybe "Bingo was his name-o" or "the hocky pokey." When Vered heard it in the background she laughed and said "so that's what you're doing on those buses!" And I realize that her whole life her streets have been filled with these enclosed tours - mysterious bubbles - where inside the bubbles her country is being explained to non-Hebrew speaking foreigners in ways I'm sure she often would not recognize. I've been on some very different kinds of busses and they are describing dramatically different truths about Israel to people who often have little experience beyond the confines of those tours. Then when you return home, there are news feeds and listserves that continue the tour.

There are tours of Israel that will fill you with the wonder and miracle of this reborn Jewish homeland, and a people rising up from the ashes to extraordinary achievement. You can take that tour. And you can take another tour of Israel, one that shows you the corrupt colonial oppressor systematically exploiting another defenseless people. That tour is also available. This is the way complicated reality gets simplified and translated into English then packaged and marketed for American audiences. This can be cynical misrepresentation of reality or the inevitable distortions of translating into another language for an audience of limited understanding.

There is often a strange disconnect between opinions and realities in Israel and what circulates in the American press. I am sure I am not the only one who while living in Israel or even being there for a few weeks, and reading the American press realize that what is being described in the US press feels entirely disconnected from what was actually happening.

Here are two recent examples that caught my eye, both from the New York Times. One op ed was titled: "If You Think Trump Is Helping Israel, You're a Fool." Ok, that's one opinion. Very American. But if that's the case, does that mean a majority of Israelis are fools regarding what is good for their own country? Our president is popular in Israel. Poll Shows 68 percent of Israelis express confidence in our president, compared with 28 percent in the U.K. and 30 percent in Japan.

Here is the second example from the Times by Rabbi Daniel Gordis who wrote recently about Israel:

It was American universalism that made the United States such a welcoming haven for Jews, while in Israel, it was particularism that gave the country its purpose: to save and protect Jewish lives. While it failed to save most of Europe's Jews from Hitler, it succeeded in saving the Jews of the Arab world, who now constitute more than 50 percent of the population.

That last line jumped out at me because I had just been reading an article recommended to me by TAA member and Israeli scholar Shoshi Gerber. Shoshi's scholarship is on Israeli Sephardim (Jews of Middle Eastern or North African Origin). The article she gave me. (Take a deep breath fellow Ashkenazim) is titled *Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims*. In that article there are examples of the patronizing and colonialist attitudes of Ashkenazi Zionists toward Sephardi Jews. Reading Rabbi Gordis's assertion that Israel "saved the Jews of the Arab world" could have been another example of Ashkenazi patronization.

From across the political spectrum people are packaging their Israel story for American audiences. These stories are oversimplified and therefore misleading because the Israeli reality is too complicated for most of us to follow. It doesn't mean these stories are wrong, but they are incomplete and missing the complexity of Israel. If we are going to learn something, and disagree for the name of heaven, we will need to get out of our buses, bubbles and echo chambers and listen to opinions and perspectives which are unfamiliar and even objectionable.

So we have substantial challenges in talking together about difficult topics and about Israel. Most contentious and lurking behind the relationship to Israel for many is the ongoing conflict with Palestinians and the diminishing possibilities for a two-state solution. I believe there is interest and willingness for a serious conversation about Israel. We saw this with the Israel Study Group at TAA a few years ago, and I hope we will see it again. The Israeli American author Yossi Klein HaLevi writes:

I think there is among many Jews, a deep historical awareness, whether it's conscious or not, that seventy or seventy-five years after the Holocaust this story cannot end in a historic Jewish schism. Because that's where we are heading... In some sense we're already in the beginning of that process. I feel we need to try to create spaces for Jews where we can speak about Israel and other issues that divide us in ways that don't lead to shouting matches and that explore what are some of the common shared values that most Jews have in common over Israel.

So how do we proceed? The first time I was ever before this community, was April of 2011 when, as a fifth year rabbinical student I was invited by the Rabbi Search Committee to lead Shabbat services at 33 Commercial St. After the service on that Shabbat morning a group of you

sat down to ask me questions and the first question was from Alan Feldman: “How will you talk about Israel?” My answer was: I want to talk about Israel by listening to and reflecting the voices of Israelis and whoever is closest to the issues we’re discussing and has the most at stake. Nine and a half years later, that is still my answer and how I plan to proceed this year.

This approach will take two forms. First, I have begun to explore forming a committee, starting with Israeli members of TAA with the goal of improving the understanding of Israeli history, politics and culture without promoting any consistent ideological or political agenda. My hope is that we will be able to provide opportunities for learning and discussion that are informative, thought provoking and challenging. I hope that we will have some learning opportunities coming from this group in the spring. In the meanwhile, I want to invite TAA members to read a book together, as we did with the Israel Study Group. The comment by Yossi Klein HaLevi was his reflections after a three month book tour in the United States promoting his new book: Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor.

I want to read this book with you because of both its form and content. In content, Halevi writes ten different letters to try to explain himself and his relationship to the Land of Israel to an imagined Palestinian neighbor. The book is also directed to American Jews who he feels also do not understand him and his relationship to the land. His perspective is interesting and worth digesting. In the book he includes his understanding of the biblical and historic formation of Jewish peoplehood including Jewish and Zionist history.

More important than the content of the book however, is that it is an effort to begin a dialogue. Therefore he tries to be aware of his biases and privilege and is open to critique and criticism. The letters of the book are available free for download in Arabic and in the second edition there is an epilogue with some of the responses he received back from Palestinians. And so the book models the way I hope we can talk to each other; aware and self reflective about our particular perspectives and unafraid to hear the perspectives of others, even if they strongly disagree with us.

Please sign up - depending on the size of the group I’ll decide how we’ll read it together. You will certainly be able to sign up on line after Yom Kippur, or, if you know you’re interested, place a blue card into your name tag. If you are enthusiastic about this and highly likely to participate, please fold the card in half.

In closing, I want to return to Rabbi Hillel. Hillel was fearless. He was not afraid “his argument” would not prevail because he was humble and knew that the fact that an argument was his personal perspective was not important. What is important is the perspective of Heaven - a perspective of which no human can be confident.

What is best for Israel? We can't know this any more than we can know the future. We can have strong opinions but it is overconfidence to pretend to *know*. And what can we do to strengthen Jewish unity? I think that is much more clear: we learn together. We learn from each other by listening with attention and offering respectful challenges and questions.

I want to close with the poem by Yehudah Amichai that I will read again in about 24 hours as we enter the final service of Yom Kippur -

The Place Where We Are Right

by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.
The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.
But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah!