

Civil Discourse Rabbi David Booth Rosh Hashanah 5779 (2018 C.E.)

We approach God in fear and trembling at Rosh Hashanah. This year, I am approaching this moment in fear and trembling because I want to touch on something of real importance. And yet, because it touches us directly, I am afraid. Afraid I will say the wrong word, or I will put the wrong emphasis. So I ask for your compassion, to listen before judging, to stay with me as we talk even if the words are hard or wrongly chosen.

I want to bring God more into my life and into my actions. I even want to bring God into my arguments. That seems very Jewish, no? And yet, something is going on here and everywhere that is driving God out of our speech and words.

In the last month alone I've been called a liberal – which is clear from my CyberTorahs. I had someone call me a Trump lover under their breath. And in case this isn't obvious, not in a nice way.

I've been told I'm an anti-Zionist and I've been accused of supporting Israel's current government even though, and I'm quoting here, its nationalistic and destructive of Jewish ideals.

My wife tells me these are signs I'm doing my job right.

I've also experienced this kind of labeling and the pain it causes others in these past few weeks. I spoke with someone who felt like they got shouted down for wondering how Arab Israelis can be part of Israeli society. I spoke with someone else fearful to share more right leaning positions in our congregation because it would be unsafe to do so.

I know Republicans and Trump supporters in our community afraid to share what they believe and who they are. We tried to get a focus group of conservatives for our Strategic planning but failed- because people were afraid to be that public with their views.

This has to stop.

I've heard people discussing seriously the question of whether there can be a good Republican- and if there can, how can there be a good Trump supporter? I've also heard Conservatives talk about the naivete, ignorance, and hatefulness of liberals.

We have gotten to a place where we imagine the other in such hateful terms, that there seems no room for dialogue or shared community.

It has to stop.

You may know the story of Hillel and Shammai and the Roman soldier. It comes in the context of a few verses in proverbs. To retell the story: A young Roman soldier goes before Shammai and says, "Teach me all of Judaism while I stand on one foot." Shammai is taken aback at the young man's rudeness of foolishness. He remembers the verse:

3 אֶזְרֵךְ לַסּוּס, מְתֵיב לַחֲמֹר; וְיִשְׁבֹּט לְגֵי כְסִילִים. A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the back of fools.

And beats the young man away with a rod.

So the young man then goes to Hillel. He asks the same question, with the same obnoxious manner. But Hillel remembers the rest of the verses:

4 אַל תַּעַן כְּסִיל, כְּאִוְלָתוֹ: פֶּן תִּשְׁוֶה לּוֹ גַם אֲתָה. Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him.

פֶּן יֵעָנֶה כְּסִיל, כְּאִלְתּוֹ: 5 Answer a fool according to his folly,
יִהְיֶה חָכָם בְּעֵינָיו. lest he be wise in his own eyes.

So he answers according to his foolishness with a phrase that can be said while standing on one foot. But also not, with a hidden warning and challenge in his words. He says, “Love you neighbor as yourself.” All the rest is commentary, now sit and learn.

In other words, I hear your anger and your frustration. And yet: this isn’t the way to act. You need to love your neighbor and only then can you find God’s Torah. The answer is so compelling that the young man sits and learns.

Shammai is one kind of answer that lives in us. It arises from anger and a sense of being mocked. And it leaves no room for God. Hillel is something else. His answer resolves the seeming paradox of the verses. Hillel sees past the outward labels, the tribal differences between Jew and Roman, and connects not with an adversary but with a human being. According to tradition, this young man sits and becomes a great scholar in his own right. God gets invited into the picture, and it makes all the difference in the world.

Today I worry we are in the grips of Shammai’s rage. We are beating away the challengers and losing our chance to connect around shared humanity.

David Brooks wrote a piece in January about the rise of tribalism. Triumph of belonging over thought. Quoting sociologist Jonathan Haidt,

“A funny thing happens,” Haidt said, “when you take young human beings, whose minds evolved for tribal warfare and

us/them thinking, and you fill those minds full of binary dimensions. You tell them that one side in each binary is good and the other is bad. You turn on their ancient tribal circuits, preparing them for battle. Many students find it thrilling; it floods them with a sense of meaning and purpose.”

We are heading down a destructive path. I see it at Kol Emeth, a place where we share already a strong connection with one another. When you begin to extrapolate, maybe Dennis Prager is right when he says our civil war is already here.

We now expect rituals of belonging in places that used to be held outside the political fray because they were community institutions designed to bring us together, to remind us of our shared humanity, compassion and love. Places like Kol Emeth that are supposed to be bigger than the political moment somehow have become smaller

Part of what gets in the way is the pain many feel in this moment. Trump’s election was so startling, and so rewrote what we thought about American politics, that it created an emotional turbulence in its wake. Some are stunned and hurt, fearful of what is next.

I want to both hold that feeling in love, because I care about everyone in this room. Yet I also want to gently suggest we need places to hold and honor the pain and disruption we feel and then take a breath before our real and legitimate feelings turn into hatred of the other.

This is a political moment unlike any other – and we are called upon to preserve our democratic institutions by stepping away from the brink of total demonization of the other. We have a responsibility to remember that one core US value is; we must all hang together, or assuredly we will all hang separately.

I believe we can do something about it. At least here, in our community. But maybe a model for others, a way of learning Jewish values of speech and listening.

I want Kol Emeth to be a welcoming place with a political pluralism that keeps politics off the bimah and which models listening and genuine curiosity.

So how can we get there?

It is a deep Jewish value to talk, to remind ourselves that opponents can also teach us. We even have the concept of a disagreement for heaven's sake, *Makhloket l'shem Shamyaim*. Such a disagreement means that both proponents in an argument sincerely believe what they are saying.

Yet how can we tell an argument of values that needs to be had, that lets God in, from an argument that destroys and keeps God out?

The Eybshitz, an Hasidic commentator, has a great thought:

This is how a person can know. If the parties in conflict, other than the matter over which they disagree and oppose one another, truly love one another in their heart and soul, this is the sign that their *mahloket* is for the sake of heaven. However, if they are enemies and are holding onto hatred for one another through their *mahloket*, this is not for the sake of heaven, and the Satan has settled himself within them.

The way we can tell is our interpersonal experience. It's not about the idea itself, it's whether we can hold onto love for the other. Because when we lose that love for one another, a pit opens up and we are as far away from God as we can.

A story: There were thugs, hooligans, in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood who tormented Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Meir was so upset, hurt or bothered, that he prayed God to kill these thugs. Rabbi Meir's wife Berurya heard his prayer and yelled at him: "What are you doing? Do you think you can pray for their death? The Bible tells us: 'Let sin cease from the land.' This means: let the sin die, but the sinner live! Pray instead that they repent."

Rabbi Meir heeded his wife and prayed for these thugs to repent. And indeed, they did!

So, step one: separate views and even behavior from people.

We live in a moment when we tend to personalize and even demonize our opponents because it works. We then turn someone into an enemy. Its effective, so we do it. It is effective for the right to claim Obama is a Manchurian candidate because it gives us an enemy. It is effective on the left to demonize Jeff Sessions: because then there is an enemy.

We should have great courage in calling out bad behavior. Yet we also believe humanity is created in the divine image. To quote Christina Hayes, paradoxically, we have to draw people close at the same time we call B.S. B.S.

That means we have a sacred responsibility to look for that image in others. In some, it shines forth, for others it may be more hidden.

And an even more difficult teaching: for some of us, it is harder to see that image in others. We are the ones blinded.

I may dislike what someone has to say: and yet, remain open to our shared humanity.

So step one in fighting tribalism and what Brooks calls the centripetal forces tearing us apart is to remind ourselves of shared humanity, that we are all created in the image of God.

Step two: like Beruriah, to remind ourselves that people can change. Where Meir saw only the pain and fear of his experience, Beruriah saw people who might find a different path. Where Shammai only saw a Roman soldier mocking, Hillel saw a young man in search of meaning.

Teshuvah means we can change, that hope isn't lost. So how do we effect change on someone else?

I believe the most powerful tool we have is love combined with compassion. Once Rabbi Meir opened his heart to these thugs, something changed in them. But it was only possible because something changed in him. Once Hillel listened to that young man, possibility emerged for both of them and God entered the picture.

Here's the thing: when God enters the picture, we remember our compassion and we remember that people can change. God can move our hearts.

Now of course we tend to think: that means I can change their minds. And this is part of it. But it means more deeply: our hearts can change. We believe that people can change and grow and have a literature teaching how best to do this.

B. Erchin 16b

מנין לרואה בחבירו דבר מגונה שחייב להוכיחו? שנאמר: הוכח תוכיח, הוכיחו ולא קבל מנין שיחזור ויוכיחנו? תלמוד לומר: תוכיח, מכל מקום; יכול אפי' משתנים פניו? ת"ל: לא תשא עליו חטא. תניא, א"ר טרפון: (תמיהני) +מסורת הש"ס: [תמה] +אני אם יש בדור הזה שמקבל תוכחה, אם אמר לו טול קיסם מבין עיניך, אמר לו טול קורה מבין עיניך. אמר רבי אלעזר בן עזריה: תמיהני אם יש בדור הזה שיודע להוכיח

From where do we know that one who sees an objectionable thing in his fellow is obligated to rebuke him? As it is written (Leviticus 19, 17) "you shall surely rebuke". If he rebuked and it wasn't accepted, how do we know that he should return and rebuke? The verse says "surely rebuke", under all circumstances. One might have thought even if his face changes [i.e. you rebuke him in public and he is embarrassed (Rashi)], so the verse teaches "do not bear a sin". We have a teaching: R' Tarfon said "I would be astounded if there is someone in this generation that can accept rebuke; were one to say 'remove the splinter from between your teeth', he would respond 'remove the beam from between your eyes'." R' Elazar ben Azariah said "I would be astounded if there is someone in this generation that knows how to give rebuke"...

I love this source because Rabbi Tarfon's frustration that NO ONE IS LISTENING gets met with a model of compassion from Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. He models gentle rebuke in his very response to Rabbi Tarfon. Maybe no one is listening because you aren't listening either. Maybe no one is listening because you have forgot your compassion and love. God is no longer in the picture.

We need more practice in HOW we challenge other ideas. We need help in letting God back into our speech and arguments.

We have to listen more. Ekev Tishmaun, if only you will listen, amazing things happen when you listen to someone else.

We want others to be compassionate and understanding towards us: that means we owe them the same compassion and understanding we seek.

I find this especially painful personally. I have always felt being a congregational Rabbi means one has to love your community. And I love you. I love being part of this community and its people. And yet:

this moment creates fear in me to share of my self. I'm afraid to be open at my Shabbat table about my own views; lest someone become offended and turn away. I'm afraid at kiddush to talk openly for the same reason.

I'm afraid...and its hard to be pastorally present for the pain many are feeling because I am running away from the whole endeavor. And that has to stop.

I believe:

God isn't a Democrat or a Republican. We are in the service of God. Parties are only tools. Jewish values aren't more in line with either party: we hold a strong sense of shared values but we may express them in a variety of ways. Jewish ethics has always taken competing values to arrive at ethical decisions. We all carry the same values but are evaluating their relative importance in different ways.

Our job in this moment; is how we can learn to talk to one another, how we can create a space in which God can dwell in our disagreements.

So forget about the outside world for a minute. Let's just imagine how we can be with each other.

Part of that is keeping politics off the bimah. This space ought to be a sanctuary from all the anger and frustration out in the world and cable news. Lets imagine that again: A world without cable news... And also a space that can hold our pain and loss in love and compassion.

This also needs to be a space where we learn how to talk with one another and also a space where we can learn in opt in experiences about the issues of our moment and the deep teachings of Jewish ethics.

I'd like us to be able to bring in speakers because we are curious without them necessarily representing anything about Kol Emeth. They are here not because we agree but because we are interested, that we have come in order to learn.

We need to be able to do. To begin identifying some areas of communal consensus for action. That ought to include supporting Israaid, supporting local issues of poverty and housing, as we search for ways the KE platform can be used for good.

Imagine: we remind ourselves how much we want people to feel safe and secure when we gather. We remind ourselves of language and unreflective assumptions that may damage our welcome in the veil of ignorance. We invite God in.

We start any discussion of politics with love. I am grateful you are here; I care about you.

We persuade but never embarrass. We speak strongly and forcefully and make sure our love and compassion is the most forceful part of our speech. Gods presence reminds us to bring our best most loving listening self into what we do.

I call upon us to be like Hillel who saw vulnerability and searching and effected real change, or like Bruriah- who saw shared humanity even amid bad behavior. If we can do that, at least we can change our own community, and perhaps offer a model beyond. Then we invite in God's blessings in a way that can transform us for the good.

Lshana tova-