

Curiosity & Judgment
Michelle Oberman
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One rainy fall day in my senior year of college, my Chinese history professor, Sherm Cochran, arrived wet and panting, and hobbled to the chair at the front of the room. Although he was only in his 50s, he could no longer stand when lecturing because he suffered from chronic back pain. Past students told of years when he lectured lying flat on a table, staring at the ceiling. That afternoon, he began by saying, “You know, there’s nothing more important in life than discovering what makes you curious, day by day.”

He was a great teacher, but I don’t remember a thing about Chinese history. I wrote his words in the margins of my notebook, though: “There’s nothing more important in life than discovering what makes you curious, day by day.” I thought I understood what he meant. That staying curious was the key to living a meaningful life.

I chose to follow in his footsteps, becoming a professor. It’s a job where I get paid to ask questions. It ought to be easy, staying curious in my line of work. But in truth, it is ridiculously hard. The older we get, the more rigid and judgmental we become.

As we enter the “days of awe” this new year, it is worth pondering how we might better cultivate the sense of openness and curiosity that is a precondition of awe.

Babies are born curious. They explore the world with all their senses, tasting the frosting and the worm. As we age, we become better judges—we don’t touch the stove.

We keep ourselves safe by learning to assess risk, to sort friend from foe. It is an ancient strategy upon which our survival as a species depends.

But there are downsides to over-relying on our capacity for judgment. Rabbi Amy Eilberg's wonderful book, *From Enemy to Friend*, describes the brains' limbic system—responsible for our fight or flight response. It served us well when we encountered lions on the savannah. But Rabbi Eilberg explains how those instincts have gone awry in today's world. We live in a state of near constant limbic arousal, unable to distinguish between, "I disagree with you," and "I'm afraid you're going to hurt me."

As some of you know, I study abortion. For almost half a century, our country has been embroiled in an abortion war in which both sides see the other, without curiosity, as enemies. I have spent long decades fighting for abortion rights, and I know the pleasures of judging my enemies. There is comfort in solidarity; we focus on what unites us—on our certainty that we are right; that we're fighting on the side of justice.

But alongside my judgment, I've heeded Professor Cochran's advice to stay curious. I have learned that the rhetoric of "choice" often doesn't reflect the reality of women having little or no choice. I have learned that abortion is largely a response to constraints on money, job, and relationship—and that for far too many people, ending a pregnancy feels less like a choice than it does a necessity.

I began to wonder about my “enemies” in the abortion war: what was it they hoped would change if they won?

Two years ago, shortly after I published a book about our misguided abortion war, I got an email from Julia Hejduk, a stridently pro-life professor at Baylor University. “I’ve probably prayed on the sidewalks outside of the abortion clinics where you’ve volunteered,” she wrote, “but I hear your message, and I think there’s common ground. Let’s talk.”

It was as if I had conjured her up—my ideal reader. Since that initial email, Julie and I have been talking every couple of weeks for almost two years now. The secret to our ability to stay in conversation lies partly in our genuine desire to understand one another. But it’s also due to our willingness to suspend our instinctive distrust—our default tendency to judge.

Talking with Julie hasn’t led me to change my opinion on abortion, but it has changed the way I think and speak about it. For years, I argued that the idea of forcing a person to carry an unwanted pregnancy was akin to slavery. I was surprised to learn that Julie, too, invoked slavery when she explained how legalized abortion treated unborn babies like property. If we were to learn from one another, we would have to set aside our judgmental analogies and speak honestly about why we cared about the issue itself.

And once we did, we were surprised to find points of agreement. Both of us believe that society should do more to offset the often oppressive and coercive cost of

motherhood, whether by promoting access to affordable, high quality day care and education, or by taking concrete steps to end the diaper shortage, which affects 1 in 3 American babies.

This past weekend put our commitment to the test, though. Yale University hosted the annual gathering of the Ivy League Pro-Life Students. Julie and I were keynote speakers at an event titled, “Visualizing an Alternative to the Abortion War.”

At the banquet the night before our talk, I was like an anthropologist visiting a foreign culture. Students spoke of feeling isolated and marginalized as Christians on campus. The young man next to me wiped away a tear when one speaker described how a pro-life counselor persuaded her not to have an abortion. His tears brought to mind the Talmudic and Koranic injunction: To save a life is to save the whole world. So that’s how they see it, I thought.

But on the morning of our presentation, things shifted for me. The first speaker of the day launched a 45-minute attack on Planned Parenthood, outlining a strategy for taking them “down.” She named feminists as the enemy. I tried to listen, but all I could hear were her distortions and lies. I scrawled frantic notes, with challenges and comebacks I knew I could not utter. My pulse raced.

At last, the break came and Julie and I stood outside together in the sun.

“You got triggered,” she observed.

“Limbic arousal,” I responded.

I spoke of my frustration at the way the speaker had characterized people like me. At her failure to consider what would and would not change if abortion became illegal.

Julie responded, but not to my judgment. “This is hard,” she said. “You’re behind enemy lines,” she said. “G-d has called us to this work,” she said.

And then, we got up on our high stools at the front of the room. We told the story of our improbable friendship. Of how, in this time of civil discord, our mutual curiosity has led us to a different conversation. I shared with the students not just *what* I believe, but *why* I believe it.

Afterward, when they approached me with questions, I could see they were curious, wondering how I might respond to the arguments they found persuasive. One earnest young man accused me of saying that it would be better if poor women had abortions, rather than babies. But before I could answer, the pro-life women alongside him jumped in to defend me. I didn’t need to say a word.

Which brings me back to my college professor, Sherm Cochran, and his declaration that, “The most important thing in life is discovering what makes you curious, day by day.” What I didn’t understand at the time was how hard it is to stay curious. How it is in our nature to narrow our circles, to default to judgment rather than staying open to

others. The fractured culture of distrust in which we live is the inevitable product of favoring judgment over curiosity.

Today, I hear his words as an exhortation: Judgment paints you into a corner. Point yourself in the direction of curiosity, and take small steps, day by day. Curiosity, too, can keep you alive.