

Rabbi Michael Beals

Erev Rosh Hashana 5783

[Note: pre-set Chanukah menorah and nine candles]\*

### HYBRID OR BLEND – THAT IS THE QUESTION

I am entertaining this great divide in our synagogue membership – to Zoom, or NOT to Zoom, that is the Question. And if we continue to Zoom, and conduct in-person services do we call it “hybrid” or “blended”?

I am actually more interested in that second question than the first. Of course, Zoom is here to stay. The Committee of Laws and Standards of the Conservative Movement originally ruled on an emergency basis to allow the Zooming of services, even on Shabbat and Holy Days. Counting people on Zoom as part of the minyan supports the most important mitzvah of *pekua h nefesh* (saving a life) in the face of the COVID19 pandemic. And since that ruling two-and-one-half years ago, we have not yet freed ourselves from the variants of this original pandemic.

😊 With Zoom technology we have been able to reach out to so many people outside our area and included people who are immune compromised or living with a loved one who is immune compromised. We have been able to include people who simply cannot get dressed, be out of the house, and in the Beth Shalom chapel by 7:30 am every weekday morning.

With a meaningful alternative they can make a positive difference in the lives of those who CAN gather inside our shul by 7:30. Tradition and Change are the motto of the Conservative Movement. Most of our changes to our approaches to *halacha* (Jewish law) have been in response to serious changes in our society, from attracting members who live in the suburbs to becoming egalitarian and inclusive.

Over these high holy days, I am interested in the difference between hybrid and blended, and what such a difference might make in the way we speak to one another, especially how we tackle difficult subjects. It may make us more respectful and provide creative ways to interact and solve problems.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will consider “hybrid” as the act of taking two very different qualities and melding them onto each other, where each quality maintains its distinctive quality. “Blending,” on the other hand, is taking two very different qualities and mixing them in such an artful way that you end up creating something new which takes the best of both separate qualities to create something fresh and new.

One of the first examples of blending as a uniquely Jewish approach is a story most of you know well. In the first century, the Talmud reports a debate between the rabbinic leaders Hillel and Shammai regarding how to light a Chanukah menorah.

Shammai ruled that as the story is about how a large quantity of oil was diminished over eight days and the oil still burned, one should light eight wicks the first night, and one less each consecutive night until only one was left.

In contrast, Hillel ruled that one should light one wick the first night, and then add one more wick each night, adding to more and more brightness in the darkness of winter, until on the final night, eight wicks burned brightly.

Both rabbis had good points to make, and lots of followers to back each rabbi up. What to do? Rabbis who came after them BLENDED both approaches.

\*According to Hillel, we would light one more candle each night adding more joy and anticipation to our Chanukah celebration, installing each candle in ascending order, newest to oldest, from right to left. AND, according to Shammai, we would use the helper *shammash* candle to light each candle in descending order, oldest to newest, left to right, to represent the diminishing of the oil as reflected in the original Talmudic story from Tractate Shabbat.

Blending is very Jewish. But it is not ONLY a Jewish approach to resolving meritorious competing ideas.

I recently finished watching the Ken Burns documentary on Benjamin Franklin. Did you see it? The founding father was struggling with how to empower a federal Constitution, when delegates were used to governing themselves as states. The idea of taking such different ideas and finding harmony was tricky business, at best. Franklin said: "Thus I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure, that it is not the best." He also said, "Our new Constitution is now established, everything seems to promise it will be durable; but, in this world, nothing is certain except....You know this part: (Let the congregation finish the quote)))) death and taxes." Yes. Death and Taxes.

The rhetorical battle was held between the states with large populations versus states with small populations – something Delaware knows all too well. There were also divisions between the North and South. These competing interests were resolved through blending all these competing interests. There was the Virginia Plan, resulting in a House of Representatives with proportional representation.

There was the New Jersey plan, where each state, regardless of population, would have equal representation in what would become the Senate. Both these competing interests were blended into the United States Congress, something at the time which was entirely new and fresh. Like Franklin's death and taxes, it has turned out to have stood the test of time since 1787.

In our own synagogue, we are attempting to present worship services which will be equally compelling for those who have the ability to come to services at our synagogue, with those, who for one reason or another, cannot attend. My goal is to create a blended experience so that whether you are virtual or in person, you feel seen, heard, appreciated, and that you feel better than you did before you joined us.

Be it how we handle Israel to how we handle disagreements with our spouse or significant other, it is hard to arrive at a blended solution. We live in a society where "compromise" is a dirty word. As a result, not much gets done. And when something is achieved, it is normally at the expense of the other side. There is often no blending.

During these high holy days, I suggest the approach of blending is needed to address our spiritual needs, and our problem-solving. It is a decidedly Jewish approach to respecting various sides to an issue – where blending and compromise is possible for the greater good of all.

*Good Yontev*