

Rabbi Michael Beals

Rosh Hashana 5783 Day 1

### Applying the Blended Approach to Israel

L'shana Tovah.

The High Holy Days are a time to come clean with God, ourselves, and our community. So, I'll fess up.

I am a National Public Radio junky. Absolutely addicted. And among my addictions are periodic opportunities to listen to the TED Radio Hour, including one featuring Steven Pinker - professor of psychology at Harvard University.

Professor Pinker was discussing the age-old debate about whether we are products of Nature or Nurture. He says there is no debate...it is both.

*He says, "there's space for random twists and turns in the wiring up of the brain that make even identical twins somewhat different. And of course, we have our unique lifelines. We have a unique trajectory of experience as we make our way through the world and make decisions. And the decisions affect the way the world treats us, including other people."*

Professor Pinker is saying we are a BLEND of nature AND nurture. This is precisely what I have been suggesting all throughout high holy days. We are constantly being forced to take sides –Do we favor the congregants on Zoom versus the congregants in the sanctuary; Should we program more for young families versus older members? Do we need to be in the synagogue services versus finding alternative sources for spirituality? – Before you know it, these false dichotomies get really heated, like Pro-Life versus Pro-Choice; Democrats versus Republicans, or even Jew--against-Jew with J-Street versus AIPAC.

Which brings us to some of that dichotomy surrounding Israel

First, a welcome: We are blessed to have a brand-new Jewish Federation of Delaware Shelicha: Irit Gavze. Irit, please stand us and let us give you a collective *Shalom Irit!*

(have congregation repeat “*Shalom Irit!*”)

When it comes to the complexities of Israel, Irit will be your go-to person. And the Jewish Federation is planning a community-wide trip to Israel potentially for late summer, so we can learn for ourselves.

But I wonder what it might be like to adopt a “blended” approach on Israel, where we try to entertain viewpoints not in our comfort zone,

so we can be both supportive of Israel and NOT forced to check our heartfelt Jewish values at the door? I borrowed some conflicting perspectives about Israel below. Have you had an internal debate on these? Have you debated others about the following?:

\*Israel is the national homeland of the Jewish people AND Israel's control of the West Bank thwarts Palestinian national aspirations.

\*Israel deserves to live within defensible borders AND Palestinians need relief from dehumanizing checkpoints.

\*The Separation Wall has saved countless Israeli lives AND the Separation Wall has divided Palestinian communities and sometimes separated Palestinian farmers from their fields and their source of livelihood.

\*Israel is the only True Democracy in the Middle East AND Israel has often denied due process to Palestinians.

\*Israel is one of the most advanced countries when it comes to LGBTQ rights AND Israel has been openly racist regarding Jews of color attempting to make Aliyah.

In each of these couplets I can find evidence to support both assertions. Running a democracy is messy at best. Here is the ultimate blend regarding Israel:

The Zionist Dream is to be BOTH be an *or l'goyim*, that is, a "light unto the nations," AND be a nation like any other nation – in other words, treated normal, like everyone else.

Haven't you always wanted to hold the Jewish State to a higher standard, while also realizing Israel's young democracy is just as conflicted as this country was 75 years into its existence? Is the United States less conflicted now at age 246?

Let's leave the Israel example aside for a moment, and look at the false dichotomy between serving new, young families and serving older members. I see this play out every week at the Siegel JCC, where my fellow rabbis, for years now, have been very happy to join me at the Early Education Center on Friday's for Kabbalat Shabbat but they are very reluctant to join me at the Senior Center aka "the Kehilla Lounge."

Of course, we need our younger families. In order not to shrink as a congregation, for every elderly member who either passes away or moves out of the area, we need one new family to maintain membership, and we need two new families in order to grow – and the most natural source of growth for new Jewish families in Delaware is the Siegel JCC Early Child Center.

Meanwhile. We need the wisdom and experience elderly members provide to ensure ourselves a better future. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel got it right when he wrote: “What we owe the old is reverence, but all they ask for is consideration, attention, not to be discarded and forgotten. What they deserve is preference, yet we do not even grant them equality.”

This fear of being discarded when old is very real. One of the most moving passages in our High Holy Day machzor is:

ט אל-תִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי, לְעֵת  
 זְקֵנָה ; בְּכָלוֹת כֹּחִי, אֶל-  
 תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי.  
 9 Cast me not off in the time of old age;  
 when my strength faileth, [forsake me  
 not]. (2x)

We need to find a way of blending outreach to both the elderly and our young families.

And the same holds true for supporting our synagogue. In our transactional society, the synagogue cannot always prove its value daily. So perhaps we might be tempted to discard. To believe it doesn't serve a purpose because it is not visited daily or often.

We need new thinking to keep our synagogue vibrant. AND we need to BLEND that need to modernize with maintaining all that we hold dear – those traditions and practices which form our Jewish identity. That is why our Conservative Judaism's motto is "tradition AND change." It's NOT "tradition VERSUS change." Starting all the way back with our founder Solomon Schechter, at the turn of the last century, he was trying to build a grand, big-tent, American Judaism. It would help Jews fleeing the pogroms and poverty of Russia and Eastern Europe find a spiritual home in America. It would be a type of Judaism which would both feel comfortable to newcomers, and also prepare them for life in a new country.

How are we to go about finding this blend between what we feel comfortable with and that which we ought to consider adding to our repertoire? It sure isn't easy.

When I was settling my youngest child, Shir, into the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami, the Dean told us that Music is "the business of making relationships."

So, I think it's time to start making beautiful music together. We need to be about relationship building – especially with those folks OUTSIDE our comfort zone. That's my challenge to all of us this year. Make at least one NEW friend, who is NOT your religion, or NOT your race, or NOT your political affiliation. And engage them in significant communication. When you hear views different from your own, DON'T reject them out of hand. Rather, practice APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY. (Smile) APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY. Feel free to use that phrase in your own households.

Ask these new friends, without judgement, "how did you come to hold that point of view?" You may not alter your opinion. But you might. At the very least, with a little bit of empathy you might be able to imagine

that if you had walked in their shoes, you could have easily come to the same conclusion.

The High Holy Days are all about growing – spiritually, emotionally, intellectually. We do teshuvah so we might be shaken from our stagnant, lethargic, self-satisfied complacency and we return to the best version of ourselves.

Our argument about nature VERSUS nurture, is not serving us well. Our society, our country, even our Jewish people are dangerously divided. In complicated issues like Israel, engaging young and old in synagogue life, =-even Zoom technology during worship services, we are capable of entertaining more nuanced views if we allow ourselves to stretch – intellectually, psychologically, and spiritually. For our very survival we need to begin adopting a blended approach to controversial issues and the time, my friends, is NOW.

*Gemar chatima tova!*