

Sacred Dialogue
Yom Kippur Morning, October 9, 2019

A recent article in the Washington Post began:

DEMOCRACY CANNOT function optimally unless citizens are willing to listen to one another, even — or especially — when they do not agree. It is both an understatement and a sad comment on American politics to say that there isn't a whole lot of real listening going on in Washington right now, and hasn't been for some time. Therefore, it is worthy of note when a group of powerful men and women actually promise they will remain silent and listen as others speak, even if it's only for a couple of minutes.

The United States Supreme Court just published new guidance for lawyers. Justices “generally will not question lead counsel . . . during the first two minutes of argument.”¹ Giving lawyers two minutes to talk without being interrupted hardly seems groundbreaking, but in the current political and judicial climate, it is exactly that. The article continues, explaining that last term, it was sometimes only 30 seconds before justices interrupted lawyers with questions and to press their own ideological points.

How we talk to one another matters. We are living in a time of seemingly unprecedented division, hyperpartisanship, and information—and misinformation—overload. We interrupt one another. We talk past one another. We ignore the people in front of us, in order to respond to someone on our phones, our computers, our watches. Sherry Turkle, digital culture and communication expert and author of *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* writes, “It all adds up to a flight from conversation—at least from conversation that is open-ended and spontaneous, conversation in which we play with ideas, in which we allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable. Yet these are the conversations where empathy and intimacy flourish and social action gains strength.”² Social media causes us to live in an echo chamber. We are so much more likely than in the past to really only hear “our side” of things, because we shut out opposite viewpoints, and we won't always share things that might be controversial among those with whom we are sharing.³ Judaism, though, wants us to take the opposite path. Judaism encourages us to hear the other, to work through disagreements together, to engage in sacred dialogue. Consider that God is always listening to our speech—and our children often are, too. Believe what you choose to believe about God's role in our world; children repeat what they hear. Our words matter.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/supreme-court-justices-have-taken-a-symbolic-step-toward-respect-and-attention/2019/10/04/32aff7ac-e6bb-11e9-a6e8-8759c5c7f608_story.html

² Page 4

³ Pew Study cited in Turkle, page 403

The Talmud is full of stories about Sacred Dialogue. The exemplar is Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, two ancient and competing schools of learning. When Beit Hillel ruled that Jewish law permitted something, Beit Shammai often ruled that the same thing was prohibited. However, tradition singles them out as *makhloket l'shem shamayim*, disagreement for the sake of heaven: an argument that is enduring and for good purpose.⁴ Hillel and Shammai disagreed frequently, but they engaged respectfully and peacefully, a repeated example of sacred dialogue.

We look to the blue sheet you got before the service about Sacred Dialogue; we will go through it together.

Respect

The Talmud teaches that the positions of Beit Hillel are almost always the correct side in disputes, in no small part because Hillel was respectful of Shammai at all times. Students of Beit Hillel were agreeable, even when offended. When they taught the law, they taught both their own statements and the opposing statements of Beit Shammai, even teaching Shammai's first.⁵ Even when they disagreed—which they did often, the followers of Hillel were respectful of the followers of Shammai.

Sarah Stewart Holland and Beth Silvers cohost the podcast “Pantsuit Politics,” bringing their opposing politics together in conversation. In their book, *I Think You're Wrong (But I'm Listening)*, they discuss the importance of “infusing discussions with kindness and respect for no reason other than to uphold the dignity of our fellow humans.”⁶ This point of view is exactly what the schools of Hillel and Shammai believed.

Just this past weekend, during the Packer game, there was shock and outrage online at the camera shot of a self-described “gay, Hollywood liberal,” Ellen DeGeneres, along with her wife, Portia, sitting next to and seemingly having a great time with former President George W. Bush and his wife, Laura. Ellen addressed the shock on her show afterwards, saying “I’m friends with a lot of people who don’t share the same beliefs that I have. We’re all different, and I think that we’ve forgotten that that’s okay. . . When I say be kind to one another, I don’t mean only the people that think the same way that you do. I mean be kind to everyone.”⁷ She refers to President Bush, repeatedly, as her friend. She shows the importance of respecting the people with whom we engage.

Truth

⁴ Pirke Avot 5:17

⁵ Paraphrased from Eruvin 13b

⁶ Page 89-90

⁷ <https://twitter.com/TheEllenShow/status/1181395164499070976>

There is a story in the Talmud about the village of Kushta (“truth,” in Aramaic), where residents only told the truth, and nobody died for any reason other than old age. An outsider married someone from the village, they had two children, and settled in Kushta. One day, a neighbor came to the door looking for the wife from Kushta, and she was bathing. Not wanting the neighbor to think of his wife in that way, he told the neighbor, “she’s not here.” It broke the spell. People began to pass away younger—and the town asked the man to leave.

Hillel, the model for many of our rules of sacred dialogue, would probably have agreed with the man’s white lie. He explains that one should always praise a bride on her wedding day, calling her “a fair and attractive bride.”⁸ Those of Beit Shammai disagreed, asking, what if she isn’t good looking? Hillel pointed out that by praising her, it enhances her value to her groom, and it avoids anguish. The rabbis further explained Hillel’s ruling and said, “a person’s disposition should always be empathetic with people.” Fascinatingly, it means that in this case, pure honesty is actually avoided in sacred dialogue, if a little white lie can preserve the empathy and dignity of the other party.

Humor writer AJ Jacobs, he of *The Year of Living Biblically*, also tried his hand at “Radical Honesty,” a small movement that believes in telling the truth, at all times, no matter what. While he did find that “When I am radically honest, people become radically honest themselves,”⁹ he also ended the experiment with some relief at being able to keep his thoughts to himself and to be able to reintroduce some harmless white lies, in the tradition of Beit Hillel, to smooth his conversations and relationships.

In our own sacred dialogues, we have to find that line between Radical Honesty and lying, where we talk truthfully and honestly to one another—but where we also work to preserve empathy and dignity of those with whom we are talking.

Patience

On Rosh Hashanah, I told the story of Rabbi Hillel’s endless patience, when one was unable to make him angry, even interrupting him repeatedly right before Shabbat, just to win a bet. Hillel kept his even temper; the interrupter lost the bet. There are additional examples of Hillel’s unflappability. The Talmud tells of several people who wanted to convert to Judaism under outlandish circumstances. One wanted Hillel to teach all of Judaism while he stood on one foot; another potential Jew by Choice wanted to convert only if he could become the high priest; a third potential Jew by Choice wanted to learn only written law, the Torah, and not the oral law, the rabbinic texts. Yes, these stories are insulting to Jews by Choice. These stories are *meant* to illustrate that Hillel was willing to listen to anyone—even if he completely disagreed with them. Shammai is again held up as a foil, the one who rolled his eyes and wouldn’t even listen to their requests.

⁸ Ketubot 17a

⁹ <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a26792/honesty0707/>

We need to have patience with one another, too. Sacred Dialogue is not about convincing others to come to our point of view, but to try to understand others' viewpoints. The more we can slow down, be patient, and listen to others, the more likely we are to be able to have meaningful conversation. Even in every day conversation, people have different conversational styles. Deborah Tannen is a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University. In her book *You Just Don't Understand*, she details conversational pauses, the amount of time people pause as they talk—which opens the door for others to interrupt, interject, or respond. Those pauses vary greatly by geography (New Yorkers have short pauses; Midwesterners have long pauses), ethnic group, gender, and more. Especially when we are talking with someone with a different background from ourselves, we have to be diligent about making sure that everyone in the conversation has a chance to speak, even (especially) if they have a different style from our own.

Questions

Some of our speech in sacred dialogue needs to be in questions. Hillel, the Jewish college student organization this time, rather than the ancient rabbi, started an educational campaign years ago called "Ask Big Questions." They explain that "Big Questions are questions that matter to everyone and that everyone can answer, whatever [their] background or life experience. Big Questions lead to conversations where people of all ages share stories to build connection, trust and understanding."¹⁰ Some questions have included "how do we connect?" "For whom are we responsible?" "What does the world need from you?" Among their guidelines for facilitators is "ask about strong statements, things that seem to be deeply held or felt, or powerful stories." They harnessed the power of questions to ignite sacred dialogue.

A few years ago, The New York Times published an article on how to get any two people to fall in love. It consisted of a list of 36 questions of increasing intimacy, followed by looking into each other's eyes for 4 minutes. The first of the questions was "Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?" The last was "Share a personal problem and ask your partner's advice on how he or she might handle it. Also, ask your partner to reflect back to you how you seem to be feeling about the problem you have chosen."¹¹ I wonder how much of the intimacy created by these questions was the space to simply ask personal questions and listen to one another's answers for a long period of uninterrupted time. The TV show "The Big Bang Theory" used this idea in an episode¹², where characters Penny and Sheldon sat together and asked these questions to one another. The admittedly scripted end result was that they didn't fall in love, (good, because they were each in a relationship with

¹⁰ <https://www.hillel.org/jewish/ask-big-questions>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/fashion/no-37-big-wedding-or-small.html?module=inline>

¹² "The Intimacy Acceleration"

someone else), but they did become closer friends through the experience and gain an understanding of their very different worldviews.

Listening and Silence

There is a quip, sometimes attributed to Greek philosopher Epictetus, sometimes to the 15th century book of Jewish ethics Sefer HaMiddot, and to various modern celebrities, that we have one mouth and two ears, because we should listen twice as much as we talk. Our tradition tells us that when God spoke, God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the still small voice, or the quiet murmuring song that followed the noise.¹³ If Elijah had been talking the whole time, he would have missed the sound of God. We have to give that space for God's voice, for another's voice. Hillel's Ask Big Questions instructs coordinators "listen to understand, not to find deficiencies in someone's argument." Similarly, we must listen without formulating our own response, listening for the words the other person is saying, the feelings behind their words, the passion in their words. Our entire religion is based on listening: Shema, Hear O Israel.

Holland and Silvers, the dialoguers with opposing political views, encourage us to "get curious" and really learn about issues we are debating or discussing. They describe that curiosity as a combination of research—not just the biased kind we often do to bolster our own preconceived notions—and really paying attention to the other's point of view. We need to be silent and listen before jumping in with our own opinions.

Even this morning's Torah portion reminds us, "You return to the Eternal your God, *listening* with all your heart and soul to God's voice, to everything I command you this day, you and your children, then the Eternal your God will bring you back from captivity and take you back in love."¹⁴

Eilu v'Eilu - Perspective

Over and over again in Talmud, Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai disagreed. "Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: *Eilu v'Eilu*: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the law is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel" (Eruvin 13b). While it is important that the law follows Beit Hillel, it is equally important that they are both words of God. Because they were respectful of one another, because they pushed each other to be better, because they listened and asked questions, they were both words of God.

Although online communication can create shortcuts for many kinds of conversations, face to face dialogue is still necessary. Digital culture and communication researcher Turkle writes, "Politics still needs meetings that are meetings. It still needs conversations that require listening, conversations in which you are prepared to learn that a situation is more complex

¹³ 1 Kings 19:12

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 30:2-3

than you thought. You might want to change your mind.”¹⁵ Sacred dialogue won’t always lead to someone changing their mind, but it always involves being open to the possibility that it could happen.

When we disagree with one another, it is hard to accept anyone else’s opinion as valid, but it is important to remember that often, opposing viewpoints are each other’s truths. Barring outright lies, both can be true. Two people can have opposite opinions and both be hurting, both be righteously angry, both be right. There is a Calvin and Hobbes Sunday comic strip drawn completely differently from the strip’s usual style. Calvin, the mischievous and philosophical six-year-old, says, “Oh no! Everything has suddenly turned neo-cubist!” True to his description, the next few frames are all drawn in a Picasso-like style, where all of Calvin’s surroundings and Calvin himself are abstracted by the style. In Cubism, the artist breaks up and reassembles the subject, showing it from multiple viewpoints. Visually, it looks really unrealistic. In the next frame, a surprised (and cubist) Calvin says, “It all started when Calvin engaged his dad in a minor debate! Soon Calvin could see both sides of the issue! Then poor Calvin began to see both sides of EVERYthing! The traditional single viewpoint has been abandoned! . . . The multiple views provide too much information! It’s impossible to move! Calvin quickly tries to eliminate all but one perspective!” The cartoon returns to its typical drawing style in the next frame. “It works! The world falls into a recognizable order!” In the final frame, Calvin walks up behind his father, “You’re still wrong, dad.”¹⁶ In Calvin’s world, seeing *eilu v’eilu*, multiple perspectives, throws him off completely. In the world outside the comics, it is—or should be—the reverse. Seeing the real world from multiple perspectives should be the norm—even if it doesn’t change our minds in the end.

Enough

On Pesach, we sing Dayenu, although we seldom pay all that much attention to the words. As some of my students at MJDS knew, one Hebrew word for enough is “die.” With the suffix for we, or us, it becomes “dayenu,” it’s enough for us. When we have said what needs to be said, there is no reason to keep talking. It is enough. Dayenu.

What we say matters. How we say it matters. Throughout the coming year, we will be exploring the theme of Sacred Dialogue. Today, we have a chance to begin. After the morning service, there are two study sessions. Audrie Berman, Chair of our Adult Learning committee, is coordinating chevruta study, one on one conversations about peacemaking and handling disagreement. Cary Silverstein, professor emeritus at DeVry’s Keller Graduate School, is leading a discussion on being better listeners. Stick around. Explore a new perspective, meet someone new. During Sukkot, on Tuesday, October 15, we will be engaging in Sacred Dialogues about

¹⁵ Turkle, page 298

¹⁶ <https://www.gocomics.com/calvinandhobbes/1990/06/17>. June 17, 1990.

immigration. So many of our families came to this country as immigrants, and we have an open mic to share our own families' immigration stories. We will also have the chance to hear from Reenie Kavalari, who recently visited the US/Mexico border with the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, about current immigration stories. As we listen, speak, and question, we do so in this framework, following these rules of sacred dialogue.

After we leave this sacred space today, I hope we will all post these guidelines, follow them, reflect on them, discuss them. They can guide our conversations with loved ones, with colleagues, friends, as we comment on websites and social media. It can all be sacred dialogue, if we treat it that way.

May we approach the world with the knowledge that someone is always listening—and that more often, **we** must be listening. May we continue to engage in sacred dialogue with one another, with ourselves, with God.