

November 5, 2020 - *Vayera*
Weekly Message from Rabbi Peltz

Election Day has passed and the outcome is clear: we are a divided nation. This is not breaking news, but the election results are a stark reminder that we live in a polarized country. I have no doubt that plenty of pundits and commentators will offer analysis of why this is and how we address it. What I would like to focus on here is the impact it has on our TBS Family. What does it mean to be part of a community during this time? How do we relate to others who hold different political views than our own? The days when Republicans and Democrats politely agreed to disagree have largely passed. Now there is no greater conversation stopper than learning that someone voted for a different candidate than you did. At the core of this, and what worries me the most, is that one's political identity has become stronger than their Jewish identity, or at least stronger than the part of our Jewish identity that binds us to other Jews. So today let us reflect: What does it mean to sustain a warm and welcoming community, as we strive to do, during this divisive political time? How do we continue to support one another when we do not support each other's candidates?

Some of you have suggested that the answer is simply not to talk politics in synagogue. This, however, would not only be unfulfilling, it would also be an abdication of our rabbinic responsibility to teach Jewish values. Judaism has a long history of speaking up for our values. In our Torah portion this week, before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham accuses God of not acting justly. Later on, Moses stands up to Pharaoh for freedom, the prophet Samuel confronts both King Saul and King David about their moral failings, and all of the books of the biblical prophets, from Amos to Jeremiah to Isaiah, are full of examples of standing up to political leaders for the Jewish values of justice, compassion, equality and fairness. Immigration, poverty, hunger, public health, Israel, public safety and other salient issues are all topics that our tradition speaks to. Sometimes our tradition's views might seem to align with one political party and sometimes with the other. It is our responsibility to hold up our values like a mirror to our society, so that we can see how we are measuring up. We might not like what we see, but looking into that moral mirror challenges us to learn and to grow.

It can be hard to hear opposing views, especially when we increasingly live in echo chambers that reinforce and harden our own stances. Judaism, however, believes in the importance of constructive debate to help us arrive at better outcomes. Our tradition recognizes that there are two types of arguments. A mahloket l'shem shamayim, an argument for the sake of heaven, and a mahloket she'lo l'shem shamayim, an argument not for the sake of heaven (Pirke Avot 5:17). In other words, a constructive debate and a destructive debate. What's the difference? According to the 15th century Italian Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartinoro, the difference is the intention of those arguing. If the disputants go into the debate seeking truth, then it is a mahloket l'shem shamayim, a constructive argument. If, however, the disputants go into the debate only to prove their own point, or to tear down or to embarrass their opponent, then it is a mahloket she'lo l'shem shamayim, a destructive argument.

My friends, our society is full of mahleket she'lo l'shem shamayim. It is full of arguments where the intention is to tear others down, to score points and to provide entertainment. We know that this is even true of our leaders, who refuse to respect our democratic norms, and put their own

selfish benefit above the best interest of the nation. This type of destructive argument has no place at our synagogue, whether from the bima, at the kiddush tables (when we once again have kiddush), or at our programs or classes. Our intention must never be to tear down, but rather to build up. This is not to say that TBS should be free of disagreement, we are a synagogue after all, but it should always be a place of constructive disagreement. Our goal must be to challenge each other to reach a deeper understanding of how our tradition speaks to the ills of our world. The name of our people, and our Jewish state, Israel, means “one who struggles with God.” This is not only a theological challenge, it is a moral challenge. We are the inheritors of a tradition that struggles to understand how we can best live out God’s values in our world. The answers might not always be clear, but striving to figure them out together helps us fulfill our Jewish mission to make the world a better place. Keeping this in mind helps to unite us in our shared goal of strengthening our community.

To paraphrase Ecclesiastes, there is a time for being challenged, and a time for being comforted. Certainly now, as we each struggle with our unique challenges during this pandemic, we are all in need of comfort. As I said on Yom Kippur, we are all struggling with grief for the losses in our lives (<https://vimeo.com/475962502/ac67cc2c2b>). Moving through our grief, and helping our friends do the same, while being restricted in how we can be together is difficult. Yet we have risen to the challenge by doing our best to be there for all in need. We will continue to do this, and we need your help by checking in on each other and letting us know how we can help. Being there for each other in a time of need keeps us together as a TBS Family.

The challenges facing our country are serious and they are real. While we each bring our own talents and expertise to address these challenges, as a community I believe that we can best do our part by committing ourselves to be challenged by our discussion of Torah to put our Jewish values into action each and every day. While we will not always agree on exactly how to do this, we can and should agree on how we disagree, namely in the spirit of mahleket l’shem shamayim, a constructive debate. We also rise to these challenges by acting locally, treating others with kindness and respect, and by reaching out to those in need. This is what it means to be a part of the TBS Family.

During this contentious and stressful time, may our kehillah kedoshah, our holy community of Temple Beth Sholom, be a model of sustained cooperation, a paradigm of understanding and inclusion, and a model of coexistence and getting past differences, as together we strive to live out our values for the good of our community and our country.