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Embracing Dissent: Moving Beyond Our Filter Bubbles

We are living in an age of personalization. Amazon uses data to predict what we'll like and places these items at the top of the web page, and recommends other items that we might like based upon our search and order history. Since I use Amazon for both my personal and work life, my Amazon home page is currently filled with plastic table cloths, school supplies, blackout curtains for my Rosh Hashanah house guests, and oh yeah, about 100 books that might relate to the topic of this sermon. But the personalization of technology goes even deeper than just e-commerce sites like Amazon. Even Google personalizes our search results. To do a quick experiment, both my husband and I Googled the same word, "Florida," on our separate devices, and each returned different results. In today's world, even though we have seemingly unlimited choices in what we are reading and watching, we really have much less control than we think.

The online world is now tailored to each individual based on algorithms that track and calculate our preferences based on searches, content clicks, and other data collected as we surf the web. In his 2011 TED talk, Eli Pariser, the founder of the website Upworthy, coined the term filter bubble. Pariser explains, "The new generation of Internet filters looks at the things you seem to like—the actual things you've done, or the things people like you like—and tries to extrapolate. They are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you'll do and want next. Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us"—what Pariser calls "a filter bubble"—which, in his words "fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information."¹

¹ Pariser, Eli (2011-05-12). *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (p. 9). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Pariser points out that unlike the editors of a newsroom that served as the gatekeepers to the information we received in the past, there are no “embedded ethics” within algorithms. At the end of his TED talk, Pariser implores web developers, “We need the new gatekeepers to encode that responsibility... we really need you to make sure that these algorithms have encoded in them the sense of the public life, a sense of civic responsibility... We need [the internet] to connect us all together, to introduce us to new ideas, new people, and different people. And it’s not going to do that if it leaves us all isolated in a web of one.”² Thus, the over personalization of today’s internet might just leave us isolated instead of connected.

In an article written in January of this year, five years after Pariser’s TED talk, Danah Boyd, a principal researcher at Microsoft research, submits that the filter bubble has now expanded further. Boyd claims that social media sites like Facebook compound the trend of self-segregation, a trend “that is enabled by technology in all sorts of complicated ways.”³ Boyd reasons that in order for the US to function as a healthy democracy, we must find a way to “diversify our social connections ...and weave together a strong social fabric that bridges ties across difference” instead of isolating ourselves by only choosing to associate with those whose viewpoints we share.⁴

The concept of self-segregation goes beyond social media and the internet. Data supports that we self-segregate when we choose where to live.⁵ We also self-segregate when we choose with whom to socialize. In fact, 66% of consistent conservatives say that most of their close friends share their political views, and consistent liberals are more likely to end a personal relationship because of politics.⁶

² Pariser, E. (n.d.). Beware online “filter bubbles”. Retrieved September 19, 2017, from https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles

³ Boyd, D. (2017, January 13). Self-segregation: how a personalized world is dividing Americans. Retrieved September 09, 2017, from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jan/13/self-segregation-military-facebook-college-diversity>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Cohn, N. (2014, June 12). Polarization Is Dividing American Society, Not Just Politics. Retrieved September 19, 2017, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/upshot/polarization-is-dividing-american-society-not-just-politics.html?mcubz=3>

⁶ Terán, L., & Emmers-Sommer, T. M. (2017, July 20). Larissa Terán. Retrieved September 19, 2017, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12119-017-9453-7>

We even prefer to self-segregate when it comes to marriage. According to a 2014 Pew Study, “Three-out-of-ten consistent conservatives say they would be unhappy if an immediate family member married a Democrat and about a quarter of across-the-board liberals say the same about the prospect of a Republican in-law.”⁷ In 1960 these percentages were at a mere 5% for republicans and 4% for democrats.⁸ The statistics are astounding, yet we still continue to self-segregate at an increasingly alarming rate. Our society allows it, even encourages it, and our smartphones and devices- the tools and resources we increasingly rely upon - encourage us to further segregate ourselves into our neat “bubbles” within our world.

In contrast to our “bubble societies” of today, the rabbis of antiquity built a strong social fabric where debate and dissent were welcomed. They spent their days in the Beit Midrash, house of study, engaging in *machlochet*, debate and dialogue, with one another. It was a culture of learning and understanding, and even disagreement. The oral arguments were later written down, compiled and redacted into what we now call the Talmud. The Talmud expresses many perspectives, with many conflicting points of view often assembled on a single page. The dominant opinion alongside the minority opinion. Many of the great debates recorded in Talmud are attributed to two schools of thought Beit Hillel (House of Hillel) and Beit Shammai (House of Shammai). One of the most famous debates between Hillel and Shammai showcases Shammai’s more literal view of the law and Hillel’s more hospitable and welcoming interpretation:

When a person of a different faith came before Shammai and said to him, “take me as a student for conversion, but on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah, all of it, while standing on one foot.” Shammai instantly drove him away with a builder’s measuring rod he happened to have in his hand. When the same

⁷ Suh, M. (2014, June 11). Political Polarization in the American Public. Retrieved September 19, 2017, from <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>

⁸ Sunstein, Cass R. (2017-03-07). #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media (p. 17). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

person came before Hillel with the same request, Hillel said to him, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the entire Torah, all of it; the rest is commentary. Go and study it." Later when the person had become a Jew, he met two other converts who had experienced similar treatment at the hands of the two sages. They said to one another, "Shammai's severity drove us away, but Hillel's gentleness brought us under the wings of the Divine Presence." Hence the sages say: A person should always be as flexible as Hillel, not as inflexible as Shammai. (BT Shabbat 31a)

The majority of the time our tradition follows Hillel's view point. Yet, Shammai and his disciples continued to study and debate with Hillel's disciples. Just because we do not favor what we now label as the dissenting opinion does not mean it just goes away. In fact, Shammai's opinion helps us to understand and decipher why Hillel's teaching became "law." The danger in our society today is that we often choose not to engage with a dissenting opinion.

The issue of marrying outside of party lines was even a subject for our Talmudic sages. The Talmud teaches:

"Although the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel disagreed, the House of Shammai did not, nevertheless, abstain from marrying women of the House of Hillel, nor did the House of Hillel refrain from marrying those of the House of Shammai. This is to show you that they showed love and friendship towards one another, thus putting into practice the scriptural text, "Love truth and peace" (Zechariah 8:16)." Yevamot 14b

Even though the schools of Shammai and Hillel disagreed on certain aspects of the laws of marriage, they did not forbid their people from marrying each other. This Talmud passage quotes a Bible verse which states, "These are the things you are to do: Speak

the truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates.”⁹ This text teaches us that we need to speak the truth to one another. The rabbis understood that they may not always agree, but that we must listen to the truth, self-segregation is not the answer.

It seems all of the potential solutions to self-segregation do not call for new algorithms or boycotts of social media, rather, it involves our own willingness to step outside of ourselves and engage with other people. We have to be aware of the filter through which we perceive the world. The title of a 2014 article in the New York Times says it all, “Polarization is dividing American society, not just Politics.” Self-segregation, is a problem for everyone. This issue goes beyond politics. It’s about examining our filter- do we know people and talk to people who come from different backgrounds and have differing views and opinions? It’s about raising our children to appreciate multiple points of view, and to learn how to develop solutions, not just arguments.

With the seemingly unlimited access to information we have in our world today, there is huge potential to have a world that is more open and understanding of others. Yet, our society today has forced many inward instead of outward. We may have the information, but we don’t have the conversation. In the book *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, Cass Sunstein writes, “At its best, I believe, a system of communications can be for many of us a close cousin or counterpart to a great urban center... For a healthy democracy, shared public spaces, online or not, are a lot better than echo chambers.”¹⁰ Sunstein suggests that we must maintain a society – on and offline – “...where people are exposed to things quite involuntarily.” He uses the metaphor of street corners or public commons as a way to illustrate the need for a multiplicity of voices, reminding us we should not live in an echo chamber where we are only exposed to voices and ideas in which we agree.

⁹ Zacharia 8:16

¹⁰ Sunstein, Cass R. (2017-03-07). *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (p. 17). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

The Talmudic world embraced a multiplicity of voices. Talmudic study was the antithesis of the concept of an echo chamber. The difference of opinions sometimes even led to years of disagreement. As it is taught:

“Rabbi Abba said in the name of Shmuel: For three years the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai disagreed. Hillel said the law is in accordance with us, and Shammai said that the law was in accordance with us. A heavenly voice emerged and said. “Both these and those are the words of the living God, and the law is in accordance with the House of Hillel.” Eruvin 13b

“Both are the words of the living God.” Here the rabbis imagine God, through the heavenly voice, lifting up both sides of the disagreement. The two points of view both have meaning and importance.

Rabbi Hillel taught, “Al tifrosh min hatzibur,” Do not separate yourself from the community.”¹¹ How does this tweetable statement speak to us today?

Hillel calls us to the street corners and public commons instead of living in our filtered bubbles. We need to spend more time with others, and we need daily exposure to a great urban center of communication. That is the beauty of technology, we have the benefit of access to different kinds of people, opinions, and knowledge at our fingertips.

The only way the world is going to become less divisive and polarized is if we start talking to each other. We must have face to face conversations— it’s not enough for a liberal to read a conservative newspaper, or a conservative to peruse a liberal blog. Writer David French summarizes one of Tyler Cowan’s arguments in his book, *The Complacent Class*, French writes, “The Internet brings all of human knowledge to our smartphones, but rather than using it as a tool for outreach and

¹¹ Pirkei Avot 2:5

understanding, we're using it to find and live with people just like us. In other words, we're sorting."¹²

Our online world does enough sorting for us whether we realize it or not.

The risk of not having these conversations will continue to increasingly isolate us from one another. Soon, we will live in a country with no tolerance for opposing views. We must talk to people, whether we know if they agree with us or not, we must have the conversation. We need to talk about solutions to fix issues that are plaguing our society. We need solutions, and solutions will only be possible if we begin to have conversations. When we isolate ourselves from those who have differing opinions we run the risk of categorizing those we disagree with as bad people or stupid people. Not discussing serious issues with people we agree and disagree with goes against our tradition of debate and dissent.

How can we achieve this today in our self-segregated world? Talk to your co-workers or classmates about something besides work or school - about serious issues. Specifically talk to those whom you know or assume have a different opinion. Even if they have the same opinion ask how they came to develop their thinking. Go to a local city council meeting or school board meeting to listen and participate in dialogue about an issue you care about. Choose to do a social justice project that connects you to people you may have never met otherwise. Ask them about their life. Ask them about what keeps them up at night.

The internet and social media will continue to create filter bubbles that will cloud our view of the world. As we begin a new year, I urge all of us to take a step outside of our self-segregated bubbles. To engage with people, talk to people, listen to people, hear people. If we do this, we can and will create a more perfect world.

¹²French, D. (2017, June 08). We're Not in a Civil War, but We Are Drifting Toward Divorce. Retrieved September 19, 2017, from <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/448385/liberal-conservative-divide-americans-self-segregate-culturally>

Shanah Tovah