

Why Good People Disagree

The opposite of a truth is a lie. But the opposite of a profound truth, is sometimes another profound truth.

This quote, attributed to the physicist Neils Bohr, is illustrated by the Torah readings on the first and second days of Rosh Hashanah. They express conflict and debate between two protagonists and between two distinct world-views. Whenever conflict pits profound truths against one another rather than in opposition to a falsehood, overcoming the conflict, or resolving it, will require more than fact-checking lies until they surrender. There is no lie on the other side, only another profound truth with which one must contend.

The Torah reading that the Sages selected for the first day of Rosh Hashanah opens in a hopeful and mirthful tone. God has remembered Sarah. God has fulfilled his promise. Sarah gives birth and nurses a child at an advanced age. She weans that child, and then Avraham makes a big party to celebrate the day that his son Yitzhak is weaned. And they all lived happily ever after? If only.

Immediately following this happy opening, the Torah then tells us that Sarah observed disturbing behavior and reached a dramatic conclusion:

וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת-בְּנוֹ-הַגֵּר הַמִּצְרַיִת אֲשֶׁר-יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק:

וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרָשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת-בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִרְשׁ בְּנוֹ-הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת עִם-בְּנֵי עַם-יִצְחָק:

“Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Avraham playing - *metzabek*” which has linguistic allusions both to Isaac’s name “*Yitzhak*” and also to terrible sins. She said to Avraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

What follows can be understood as the first *machloket* in Jewish history. There had been disputes and disagreements. There were arguments and even great violence before this moment. But Avraham’s reluctance to listen to Sarah is the first time the Torah presents us with a profound truth standing in opposition to another profound truth.

Avraham does not want to send Yishmael away.

וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹת בְּנוֹ:

The matter distressed Avraham greatly, *עַל אוֹת בְּנוֹ* for it concerned a son of his.

This is a wonderfully ambiguous passage. Was Avraham distressed by what had been done to Yitzhak by his older half-brother Yishmael? Rashi suggests that Avraham’s distress was because one of his children, Yishmael, had become a bad influence and rejected Avraham’s values. Rashi himself, however, acknowledges that the plain-sense understanding of this verse is that Avraham grieved at the prospect of sending away his son Yishmael. I think these two interpretations, both quoted by Rashi, are not fundamentally in conflict.

As a parent, Avraham was grievously troubled to learn about Yishmael’s negative behavior. And, as a parent, Avraham was grievously troubled to learn that God endorsed Sarah’s demand to banish Yishmael. Avraham is understood by our tradition to have been a consummate man of *chesed*, kindness and love. Avraham was told that he would be a blessing and that all human beings and the entire human family would be blessed through him. He collects a motley crew of allies and servants of every nationality who were attracted to Avraham’s universal ideals of ethical monotheism.

Sarah was always more invested in the specific project of perpetuating Avraham's family, first through the help of the concubine Hagar, and then through her own son Yitzhak. She is fiercely loyal to her son Yitzhak because she understands that the ethical-monotheist project that brought Avraham and Sarah from their native land to *Eretz Yisrael* could only successfully change the world if it was first successful in replicating itself within one family. Sarah is not willing to risk that project by keeping Yishmael at home.

The opposite of a truth is a lie, but the opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth. Avraham and Sarah had a *machloket*, a dispute about profound truths. Is the Avraham-and-Sarah project sustained by kindness to all, or is it sustained through an investment in one's own children and one's own family?

God intervened on behalf of Sarah—she won that argument. Yishmael was banished. But, as the Israeli *Tanakh* scholar Uriel Simon has noted, the Torah very pointedly describes Yishmael's banishment in language that is strikingly similar to the depiction of Yitzhak's own trial—*Akeidat Yitzchak*—which we will hear read tomorrow morning. One son is sent away forever, and one son returns home, and yet the Torah tells their stories as if to suggest that both sons endured a similar fate. The Torah readings on the two days of Rosh Hashanah are a telling and then a recapitulation of what is fundamentally one story about a child traveling into the wilderness, in great risk of his life, only to be rescued by an angelic intervention.

Avraham and Sarah had the first *machloket* in Jewish history but certainly not the last one.

More than one hundred years ago, Rabbi Avraham HaKohen Kook, at the time living in Yafo and serving as rabbi to the city and to surrounding pioneer agricultural communities, wrote in his notebook about three forces battling for dominance within the Jewish community.

In the time of Rav Kook, he saw these forces expressed in three competing factions. Orthodoxy, Zionism, and Humanism. The *yishuv ha-yashan*, the ancient Orthodox community of Jerusalem, attacked Rav Kook mercilessly because of his willingness to accommodate modernity and to cooperate with Zionist pioneers. The most prominent Zionist activists were notable for their loyalty to their people, and also for their rejection of Jewish tradition and their scorn for the Jewish religion. All the while, enlightened Jews in Europe organized behind the principle that freedom for Jews was inseparable from freedom for all the world's peoples and attainable within a modern democracy.

Rav Kook wrote that these factions, these parties, were expressing three ideas or were the product of three forces. These three forces were the force of the sacred, the force of the nation, and the force of humanity. *Kodesh. Umah. Enoshiut.*

This *machloket*, this dispute between these three ideas, these three orienting points for human struggle, was a dispute that pitted profound truths in opposition to other profound truths.

Each of these ideals is a core demand placed upon us, that calls to us to organize our lives to promote and expand the realm of the sacred, or the interest of the nation, or the welfare of humanity. In Rav Kook's words, Orthodoxy "claims with courage and bitter zealotry on behalf of the Torah and its mitzvot and faith and all that is holy within Israel."

Jewish nationalism, in Rav Kook's characterization, "battles for all that the national orientation draws towards, including the pure natural sentiment of a nation wishing to renew its national life."

Humanism carries the banner of enlightenment and progress that cannot be confined to any one nation but extends to all human beings.

Rav Kook wrote with pathos and passion that the salvation of Israel and our flourishing as a people depends upon the unification of all of these ideals. Each ideal, (1) holiness and tradition, (2) the nation itself and its renewal, and (3) the common bonds that connect all human beings to one another, is a profound truth.

“We would be miserable,” Rav Kook wrote, “if we were to allow any of these three forces to suppress another since they must become united.” And yet, as he wrote those words, the Jewish people were divided between Orthodox Jews, Zionists, and Humanists. Instead of uniting and forming a perspective that was informed by each of the three movements, adherents of each movements saw, as Rav Kook understood things, only the flaws of the other movements rather than the ways that the other movements were expressing something indispensable.

This is the fifth Rosh Hashanah that I have celebrated at Anshe Sholom. That is an exciting milestone for me. When Sara and I had taught at Princeton for five years, all of our students who were on campus when we arrived had by then graduated and we could teach old material with impunity. So, naturally, I looked at the *drashot* that I shared here at Anshe Sholom five years ago to see if any of it could be recycled this year. It cannot be recycled. Not only because unlike college students, so many of you all have—thankfully—remained here in Lakeview, but because the message that I shared with you five years ago now seems hopelessly naive and outdated.

Five years ago, I shared an optimistic and upbeat *drasha* in which I said that unity and solidarity among the Jewish people and beyond was a possibility that would materialize if only we would choose to embrace that unity. “What we share is greater than what divides us,” I told you, so unity was a simple matter of deciding to emphasize what we have in common.

After telling you that unity was a simple choice to treat others with generosity of spirit and goodwill, and after telling you that what we share is greater than what divides us, I returned home to take my pet dinosaur for a walk in the park.

That optimism seems naive today. The Jewish community, indeed people of all religions, are divided into factions and camps, and when we look from our camps to alternative perspectives and alternative communities, we only see the negative implications of their perspective and not the positive. We cannot simply decide to be unified as I suggested five years ago. Our differences are too great.

But Rav Kook’s analysis of the bitter divisiveness that he observed one hundred years ago also offers a way forward for us as well. What we share is not necessarily greater than the causes of our disagreements, but the ways in which we are different signal the very elements that are lacking in our own perspective and that must become incorporated into our own perspective.

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Rav Kook understood that any ideology that can attract the allegiance of thousands of people and captivate the imagination of a generation of Jews must have a basis in a profound truth. A new form of Jew, Rav Kook believed, had to be created in the twentieth century who combined the reverence for tradition of the Orthodox, and the patriotism and vitalism of the Zionists, and the love for all humanity of the Liberals.

The path to unity is not to ignore the *machloket* but to look at the *machloket* as a teaching moment. If I disagree profoundly with your worldview and perspective, then I can ask what is missing from my own worldview that needs to incorporate something from your worldview.

Jonathan Haidt’s 2006 book “The Righteous Mind: Why good People are Divided by Politics and Religion” is essentially a twenty-first century update of Rav Kook based not on Jewish tradition, but on social-psychology. Bitter divisions between “good people” in contemporary America come from our devotion to different forms

of moral thinking. We are good moral people, but for some morality is defined primarily by avoiding harm to other people, whereas loyalty and respect for authority are core moral virtues to others.

Avraham and Sarah could overcome their *machloket* and become successful partners in transmitting the Jewish project to a next generation because they validated each other's priorities and shared a common goal. Overcoming *machloket* for a common purpose is also a critical component of Rosh Hashanah.

The Talmud tells us that on Rosh Hashanah *לְפָנָיו כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן*, all creatures pass before God *כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן* just as *כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן*. What does *כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן* mean? The Talmud itself offers three explanations. *כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן* could mean that we are judged by God in the same way that sheep are counted by their shepherd. Or, *כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן* could mean a narrow mountain pass, with a steep cliff on either side that can only be crossed in single-file. Or, *כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן* could be a reference to the soldiers in the army of King David who were counted by their commander and king. Rashi adds the detail that these soldiers are on their way to battle, and as Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Pakuda points out, the greatest battle of all is the internal struggle with one's own evil inclinations.

On Rosh Hashanah we face the terrifying prospect of individual scrutiny by our own Commander and King who will examine and count each and every one of us *כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן* as the soldiers in David's army were counted long ago. But that individual scrutiny is in preparation for a collective effort. Each individual soldier has to be fit and prepared for the fight ahead. But we will not be effective in our struggle unless we have a common purpose and a common mission.

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Our world is beset by lies but there are plenty of simple-truths out there to combat those lies. More challenging are the profound truths that exist in opposition to one another.

Darkness and falsehood are rampant in the world as the curtain rises on 5778. And applying the simple truths to vanquish the falsehood, and providing the moral clarity that can banish the darkness is a burden that each one of us will need to take on in the weeks and months ahead. But we need the wisdom to understand when a simple truth needs to be wielded in opposition to falsehood and when there is an opportunity for growth and for unity that can only come when two or more profound truths are allowed to exist in fruitful dialogue with one another.

Within the Jewish community there exists an existential need to figure out a way to unite, not by papering over our differences or expecting others to see things our way, but by recognizing the profound truth that exists in the perspective of the other. We need to embrace, as Rav Kook did, that the way forward will look different than anything that has come before and will need to incorporate all of the different perspectives that are currently struggling for dominance. As Avraham and Sarah did, we too must see that the survival of our people and the flourishing of our community requires a perpetual and unending balance between competing priorities.

Does the future of American Judaism require doubling down on a commitment to Jewish day-schools? Should we organize politically to fund them with vouchers, or is our long-term best interest better served by maintaining the separation of church and state?

Does the survival of Judaism require us to reinforce the reverence that we feel for tradition or must we become more open to revising and updating those traditions?

Does loyalty to Israel require us to offer its government and its people full political support at its challenging moments or do we have a greater loyalty to demand that the State of Israel, in its domestic policies of religion

and state, and in its foreign policies of war and peace, live up to the highest ideals of the prophets and sages of Israel?

Should the large legacy organizations of the American Jewish community continue their historic nonpartisan neutrality to preserve access to all levels of government or is this a moment that calls for speaking truth to power and the forging of new alliances?

The opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth. There is no knockout punch that will cause our opponents to reconsider their opinions. And we should not be searching for knockout punches. If you have not been surprised, or shocked, or even offended by an opinion shared at your Shabbat table or by a shul neighbor, consider a more expansive circle of friends. Incorporate their commitments and virtues into your own perspective so that we can pursue our common dreams and common goals.

On Rosh Hashanah we stand before God **כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן** and that should push each one of us to both tremble in the face of the reality of Divine scrutiny and resolve to identify a common mission that we can undertake with our fellow soldiers.