Perhaps you are familiar with this classic Jewish joke: a couple comes to the 
rabbi’s study to settle a dispute. The rabbi’s spouse is within earshot. The husband 
explains his complaint to the rabbi. He presents his perspective clearly and 
persuasively. When he is finished, the rabbi thinks for a minute, nods and 
proclaims, “You’re right.” “But wait a minute, rabbi. You haven’t heard my side,” 
says the wife. She explains her side of the story. So clear and persuasive is she that 
when she’s through the rabbi nods and says, “You’re right.” After they leave, the 
rabbi’s spouse looks at the rabbi perplexed. “How could you say both of them were 
right!? They had completely opposing versions of the story, one had to be right and 
the other has to be wrong.” The rabbi took a moment to reflect and nodded. “You’re 
right.”

Is the rabbi of this joke just a people-pleaser or is she suggesting that the 
other doesn’t have to be wrong for you to be right. To some of us, maybe this insight 
seems obvious. We accept that there is more than one way to peel an apple and we 
experience this in many different ways. But to others, this just doesn’t compute. Or, 
it’s a nice ideal but so not the way real life works. In his book *Why We’re Polarized*, 
Ezra Klein, a self-identified political junkie, and a journalist who reported on 
government policy for many years, tries to explain how our political process turns 
what is initially wide agreement into rigid standoffs. He writes, "Whatever the 
problem, it begins with meetings in which experts of all different perspectives sit 
together on panels and discuss the many ways [the problem] can be solved. At this
point, there is always a large zone of agreement, a belief that a compromise can be reached that will leave everyone better off compared to the status quo. But as the process wears on, as the politicians focus their attention and the media focuses its coverage, agreement dissolves. What once struck participants as reasonable compromises become unreasonable demands. What was once a positive-sum negotiation becomes a zero-sum war" (xviii-xix). Something happens between point A and point B that turns potential compromise into extreme polarization. Is there something we can do to prevent this?

For his part, Ezra Klein argues that though our two party system makes us ripe for polarization, for most of American history, the two parties didn't operate like two irreconcilable poles. But since the 1960s, he argues, our two parties have been homogeneizing and distancing from one another according to ideology, geography, demographics and religion. Remember the motto: the personal is political? At the same time that the parties are distancing, individuals are personally identifying with their party. To be a Democrat or Republican has increasingly become more a reflection of one's character than say, a tool or instrument, apart from one's personal identity, through which to transact a desired ends. These two phenomena: the homogenizing and the personalizing, are then activated by the polarizing dynamics of the media to create a toxicity that is infecting our system and us as individuals. I'm going to guess that we are all familiar with the idea of echo chambers--how our activity on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or Tiktok or Youtube or other internet sites is captured and interpreted so as to send us back ads, comments, and articles expressing or amplifying similar views and interests. It's
like being entered into a dictionary of only synonyms--the idea of an antonym is anathema. The effects of this on intensifying polarization have been and continue to be documented. As the public becomes more polarized, political institutions and actors respond in more polarized ways, which further polarizes the public.

Two other thinkers, the social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt and Israeli philosopher, Micah Goodman, address the polarization that results from the social media revolution directly. In a dialogue titled "Can Faith and Ethics Heal our Fractured, Technology-Soaked Society?", Micah Goodman suggests that the polarization we currently experience in liberal democracies, especially in the U.S. and also in Israel, is an unintended consequence of the digital revolution.† Surely the tech founders and social media gurus set out thinking they were going to bring the world closer together. And just when we find ourselves the most connected, we are in fundamental ways driven the furthest apart. You know the Yiddish saying: "Man plans. God laughs." Goodman makes an analogy to other unintended consequences. He says just as global warming is the unintended consequences of the industrial revolution and increased incidents of diabetes and hypertension are the unintended consequences of the fast food nation, political polarization and emotional crises are the unintended consequence of the digital revolution. And these consequences are threatening our well-being and our liberal democracies.

Jonathan Haidt is more precise as to when these unintended consequences began manifesting. In 2009 Facebook added its "like" button and Twitter added its "retweet" button. Technologies which were principally about communicating and keeping up with friends and families now became about performance. The main goal
was no longer sharing photos of your trip to the beach, it was posting photos that would gain the most views, secure the most followers, gain status, go viral, land you recognition, perhaps stardom as an influencer, even earn you a living through the power of your reach. Gen Z, those born in 1996 and after, were showing the effects of this revolution. In 2011-12, graphs of this generation's mental health showed a remarkable decline. The incidents of self harm, suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety rose by 50-100%. Haidt calls these teenagers the canaries in the coal mine.² So what are we to do about it?

Klein says the multiple ways we identify: conservative--liberal; religious--secular; East coast--heartland; working class--managerial class; white person--person of color; pro-choice--anti-choice, etc. are being manipulated for others’ political ends. His conclusion is that we have more control over how we’re being influenced when we focus less on national politics and more on local. He directs us to invest more time engaging with concerns taken up in one’s local district or state, where more voices can be heard, and relationships are more tangible.

Goodman sees a remedy embedded in the heart of Jewish culture. He states the commonplace that in politics, when someone changes their mind, they lose their authority. He then asserts that this is the complete opposite from the ethic put forth by the Talmud--what I call Judaism’s set of sacred arguments. He quotes another Israeli intellectual, Moshe Habertal, who has pointed out with some humor that whereas the Romans canonized laws and discarded the arguments that were made to arrive at the laws, the rabbis of the Talmud canonized the arguments and discarded the laws! Others would come later to articulate the law--or halakhah.
Goodman states that every culture cultivates the type of person we admire. Who does the Talmud admire? The people who discuss and who are willing to risk changing their minds. How do we know this?

In the Talmud there are two dominant schools of thought: Beit Hillel, followers of the sage Hillel, and Beit Shammai, followers of the sage, Shammai. Students from each of these schools famously debated with one another. Better yet, they also arranged marriages across the communities. They lived with and amongst one another--but with regard to policy, with regard to the truth of a matter--they were regularly opposed. And more often than not, about 90% of the time, the actual law that is decided follows the opinion of the school of Hillel. Why? Is it that their position was more true? Maybe--but that's not the reason given by our tradition. In fact there are two reasons that are offered.

In the Babylonian Talmud, the law is decided according to Beit Hillel because the followers of Hillel are better listeners. That is, before Beit Hillel puts forth their opinion, they state the opinion of Beit Shammai. Not only do they state it accurately and aloud, they study it, memorize it and attempt to understand it. They accord it the full respect that someone with a different opinion deserves. The law is according to Beit Hillel because they are better listeners. That's reason #1.

Reason #2. According to the Jerusalem Talmud, not only are Beit Hillel better, more respectful listeners, sometimes after reflecting on what they’ve heard, they actually change their minds. Sometimes after studying Beit Shammai’s opinions, they decide, you know, they make a better point. We’re changing our mind. As Goodman says, to truly listen to someone is to risk your own opinion. Beit Hillel
risks their own opinion. They do from time to time change their mind. And for that reason, their opinion is more respected, more trusted, and granted a higher status. This is what the Jewish talmudic tradition teaches and these are the kinds of people the tradition admires: good listeners and people who are willing to change their mind.

Jewish tradition delivers this same message another way as well. We teach the concept called the 49 vs. 49—it is a way of thinking, of seeking the truth, and of making decisions. It stems from a passage in the Babylonian Talmud that states there are fifty gates of wisdom but only 49 were revealed to Moses or to anyone. Why only 49? On the one hand, because Moses was just a little lower than God. Having access to 49 out of 50 gates of wisdom is pretty darn commendable. Exceptional, really. On the other hand, only 49 because God couldn’t ever explain the 50th gate to Moses. There is a part of God that would always remain mysterious. God is not something that any human can fully comprehend. And what we learn from this upper limit is an existential humility: no human, not even Moses, can ever claim to know the absolute truth of a matter.

Armed with this humility we proceed towards the remaining 49 gates accessible to us. Our tradition considers you wise enough to make a ruling only after you prove that you understand the 49 reasons to rule on a matter one way, and the 49 reasons to rule on a matter another way. Think of the reasons for fasting on this day: 49 reasons why one should fast; 49 reasons why not to. If 49 seems ideal, how about 5 reasons to fast and 5 reasons not to. We tried having this debate in chaverim chai. Or think about choosing a college or of vaccine policy. Think of
buying a new home. Or of immigration policy. Think of global warming: 49 pros to any energy policy pitted against 49 cons. Take any decision or position--whether a hot button subject or not--and imagine yourself studying, repeating, and understanding 98 different opinions on each. Imagine CNN and NPR and MSNBC and Fox News and ABC and Twitter comments and Facebook posts and Youtube videos dominated by pundits who were respectfully and accurately presenting an opponents' point of view. "I hear you saying...such and so." That’s what we are taught in our therapy and mindfulness sessions--to repeat back what the other is saying, right? Why? Because the first step towards solving a problem is being heard. And to hear a different point of view means that even for a few minutes, we have to step outside our own selves. Like Beit Hillel was accustomed to doing.

But to truly hear someone else is fraught with all kinds of risks. As Micah Goodman has said, to truly hear someone else is to risk changing our own mind. Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai lived in a world where they were still socializing and living with one another. But today, changing one’s mind is a hazard not only to politicians. Today adopting a new point of view can put you at risk of losing credibility, of losing friends and family--yes, it’s come to that--of losing your job, for your opinion on a whole host of issues increasingly has to line up with a rigidifying set of partisan dictates that is patrolled by...who is it patrolled by?

We might want to argue that the problem is we don’t share the same facts. I won’t deny that’s a problem but in Democracy Despite Itself, Danny Oppenheimer and Mike Edwards document how voting preferences and political affiliation have never been based on facts. Since the 1960’s, study after study shows voters don't
understand the issues, don't know where their favorite candidate stands on the issues and most often, believe that their favorite candidate agrees with them (17). Believing in untruths is nothing new. What would be new is listening to the other side--and being heard in return.

Goodman defines political polarization as hating someone for their political affiliation. To this problem, he wants to mainstream and normalize the Talmudic ethic. He says the contemporary problem of polarization could have an ancient solution. A polarized world is where conversations and listening collapse. A talmudic ethic is where conversations multiply and listening increases. In Israel the idea of the Talmud is becoming increasingly attractive to the largely secular population. Being talmudic is becoming a metaphor for radical listening and putting your own views at risk. Can this become the dominant ethos in Israeli society? In our society? Goodman argues that "if an unintended consequence of the industrial revolution is global warming which led to the green movement and climate justice, then we need to create the movement that responds to the unintended consequences of the digital revolution that is polarization. Just as ancient cultures connected to the land inspire us in our attempt to heal the planet, ancient cultures with strategies for listening and arguing could be part of the answer to protecting democracy from the digital revolution. Where conversation is being attacked, well-ingrained traditions within Judaism could be marshalled."

Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal tells the story of visiting his grandparents who were well into their nineties. "They were married for almost 70 years. When [he]would visit them, [he] found that they often yelled at each other--in Yiddish. Part of it was
that they both [were hard of] hearing. But they also clearly had passionately
different views on everything, from how sweet gefilte fish should be to who was the
best Yiddish writer. One day [Rabbi Blumenthal] asked [his] grandmother, 'Why do
you and Grandpa argue so much?' She looked shocked, and finally responded in her
strong Yiddish accent. 'Argue? Ve don't argue! Ve DISCUSS, for sure! But argue?
Never!'"³

Jewish tradition specializes in debate. Our tradition values and admires those
who can not only clearly state opinions that are not one's own, but who also are
willing to risk changing their minds like those from the school of Hillel. Our tradition
demands we expand our views beyond our own--to 98 different perspectives! 49 for
and 49 against, remembering absolute truth belongs only to God. We as a people
don't always live by these values. But if we want to be the change that we want to
see, we should certainly try. Let us not commit the sin of political polarization:
hating someone because they hold opposing views. Break out of your echo chamber.
With some dedication and persistence, our ancient wisdom can be part of a solution
to a deepening schism threatening our society.

Keyn y’hi ratzon. May this be God’s will. G’mar hatima tovah.

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¹ Shalom Hartman Center, June 2, 2022.
² Data found at https://jonathanhaidt.com/social-media/
³ Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal serves as CEO of the Rabbinical Assembly and of the United Synagogue of
Conservative Judaism.