

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5779: Civil Discourse

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I learned in Rabbinical School that as Rabbis, we often give the sermons that we need to hear. Today, this could not be truer. I have a suspicion though, that we are all in the same boat.

Who here, spent time with family this summer, or perhaps a group of old friends, and when you entered the event or social setting, you all knew that there were certain parameters about what you could talk about? At one event I attended this summer, using the name of the man who lives in the big white house in Washington DC was forbidden, and two days later, among a different group of people, even talking about anything remotely political was out of the question. Any discourse on the subject was—by unspoken rule—absolutely prohibited because of how fraught such conversations have become.

Our collective difficulty with civil conversation and respectful disagreeing extends beyond politics.

We no longer know how to talk about religion or healthcare, we struggle to discuss the challenging nature of how men and women interact with one another in our society. These are issues that we as Jewish Americans care deeply about, but no longer want to bring up for discussion. This difficulty even infects that other great religion (at least in Texas): football. According to the Texas Association of Sports Officials, 19 percent of high school football referees did not return to work for the association after last year's season, forcing some High schools to move their Friday night football games to Thursday nights. KUT reported that, "Multiple factors are at work in the shortage that are beyond anyone's control...However, **Eighty percent of the refs who left the part-time gig did so because they no longer wanted to get yelled at by parents, students and fans.**"

The problem is clear: We do not know how to respectfully argue with one another. Watch any recent political debate, go to a sporting event, go out to eat with a group of your friends who align themselves with

different political parties (*if you have such friends.*) We are experts at yelling over one another, at attacking the person and not their position, at assuming the worst possible motive for any contrary position, and at becoming offended—or causing offence—in an effort to shut down the conversation rather than engage with someone with whom we disagree. And yet we often see silence as the only “respectful” alternative.

We have forgotten the value of respectful disagreement, and of the growth we achieve as individuals and communities when we engage in civil dialogue. This is particularly concerning from a Jewish perspective, because when we forget how to argue, we leave behind the core teachings our tradition provides us with to build holy, vibrant and peaceful communities.

Judaism has a long and full tradition of embracing debate, and respecting divergent opinions. We even have a special name for it.

A MAHLOKET, according to the Talmudic dictionary is a conflict, debate or disagreement where divided opinions are honored. [Jastrow Dictionary, page 473] In the Talmudic tradition and throughout modern responsa literature still published today, one opinion is ultimately followed as law, but minority opinions endure and are studied, expanding our understanding of the ritual or religious subject at hand, and providing us with a multi-faceted understanding of Jewish law. In Mishnah Avot, (also known as Pirke Avot, or the Ethics of our Fathers) 5:17 we learn, “Every machloket (conflict) which is l’shem shamayim (in the name of heaven) is destined to endure. And that which is not l’shem shamayim, is destined not to endure.”

Let me share with you of a machloket l’shem shamayim, one that you may not have known, you are already familiar with.

Our sages taught that the basic mitzvah of Hannukah is to have a light kindled by the head of each household every night.

The house of Shammai and the house of Hillel disagreed on how this lighting should occur. Beit Shammai said, “on the first day, all eight candles should be lit, and from there on, the lights should gradually decrease until on the final night, there is only one candle lit.” Beit Shammai believed that the candles lit, should correspond to the incoming days. But Beit Hillel said, “on the first night we should kindle one light, and from there on we gradually increase the light.” Hillel believed that we should kindle lights according to the outgoing days, therefore increasing the lights each night. Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel’s teachings were elaborated on by other sages. One sage explains, the reason for Beit Hillel’s opinion is that the number of lights is based on the principle: One elevates to a higher level in matters of sanctity and one does not downgrade.

We know who “won” this debate, in a few months you will increase the lights on your menorah every night, following Hillel’s teaching. But how less meaningful would this ritual be, if we lost the reasoning behind it.

We learn much more by studying the conversation and by understanding the rationale for each position than by simply knowing the law.

The Talmud records 316 debates between Hillel and Shammai, and there are only **3** issues where they **agree** with one another. But Hillel and Shammai participated in these debates for the sake of heaven, they disagreed on trivial issues because they *agreed* on the significance of Jewish law and ritual as guideposts for Jewish life. They debated one another, in friendship and with a great deal of respect for one another, in order to learn from one another. And as the sun set, they sat down together and shared a meal.

This is a model for our community. We need to argue in friendship, so we can learn from one another. Let us come to the table with a set of parameters about how we are *going* to debate, not how we are going to win the argument or avoid the tough conversations altogether.

Rabbi Ilyse Kramer writes, “Sacred Arguing works as a category, when the differing parties agree-not only to disagree; but also, to remain in relationship with one another.” (Tales of the Talmud, Rabbi Ilyse Kramer) Temple Beth Shalom is a holy community because when you filled out your membership forms you signed onto a covenantal relationship with our staff, lay leaders, clergy and members. You were saying in effect that you believe being in community with other Reform Jews is not only important, it is crucial for your existence as a human being. Since I began serving this community over six years ago, there is nothing I have admired more about all of you, than your dedication to being in partnership with one another, with our staff and with the greater Austin Jewish and secular community. True partnerships take a great deal of work to maintain, but in partnership we are a stronger community.

A true story, from just a couple of months ago.

This past summer our community struggled with how to respond to the growing immigration crisis at the Border. The trump administration's zero tolerance policy created a humanitarian crisis that no one could overlook. As the situation unfolded, our community partnered with members of the greater Austin community to offer a service on Tisha b'av, our communal day of mourning, specifically focused on the immigration crisis. In my Rabbi's message that week, I naively stated that this service would be a safe space for everyone to express their feelings about the situation. That was not the case for all members of our congregation, and I found myself after the service embarrassed for portraying it in that way. The issue of immigration is in no way simple, and our individual perspectives at that particular time varied. And so, I took it upon myself to call one of our members, whom I deeply respect, who saw the issue differently than I, and who came to the event but decided to leave after feeling her opinion was not welcome. I invited her to join me in my office to learn more about each other's perspectives.

To my delight, this individual took me up on my offer, and in a brief but respectful conversation, I learned more about her experiences with immigration that I could have ever imagined. I learned that growing up, her kitchen table was one of the first places that new immigrants sat when they moved into her hometown. This was because her mother was known as a person who helped new immigrants navigate their new surroundings when they arrived. We had so much more in common around the issue of immigration than I would have ever imagined. We differed on policy, and we both agreed that our countries immigration system today is broken, but now we could argue about it, l'shem shamayim, for the sake of heaven on earth. We also discussed the various news sources or "echo chambers" that we both read and listen too, and we shared our common hope, that members of Temple Beth Shalom, from all different political backgrounds, will be able to come together this year, in dialogue, in order to build consensus and advocate together on issues facing our society.

Jewish arguing means being curious about another's perspectives. It means offering our brothers and sisters an olive branch, when it would be easier to yell at one another or even worse, not talk to each other. It means viewing the other person's motives in the most charitable light, giving one another the benefit of the doubt, and recognizing that every human being has value and something to teach us.

Lately, I have found myself especially concerned with my own generation's ability to participate in civil discourse today. Perhaps it is because we grew up after the civil rights era and anti-Semitism rarely directly affected us. Our anger at those who have allowed voices of hate to be amplified is raw and we want someone to blame. Perhaps it is because we idolize our social media platforms, and we do not want to scrutinize the often-harmful discourse that originates through facebook and twitter. While my call today is a call to all generations, I want to highlight my invitation to millennials, generation x and whatever else we like to call ourselves.

Soon it will be our responsibility to foster this sacred community, let us ensure that we do so while inviting those whose political beliefs differ from our own into community with us.

On Yom Kippur our liturgy will include prayers of confession that we will repeat throughout the day. Confessions that allow us to ask for forgiveness from those arguments that did not go as planned. We will confess, “al chet shehatanu lefanecha, For the sin we have committed against you through the words of our mouths. For the sin we have committed against you through gossip and slander.” These words weigh on our hearts because we cannot escape their truth. Words wound and heal, destroy or build up. The words that we choose to describe others, to ask questions about issues we disagree about and to begin conversations can either invite others into a dialogue or push them away. Choose your words wisely, especially in discourse with those whose opinions differ from your own.

The Talmud teaches, “both these and those are the words of the living God.” (Eruvim 13.b) Let us recognize the holiness, the sparks of God within every human being on this earth. Let us show our society that religious communities, specifically Jewish communities are where civil discourse and sacred debate begin, because we know how to argue passionately and then break bread together in continued friendship. As I shared with you humbly at the beginning of this sermon, I need to hear this message as much as you do, join me as our community leads the way in 5779, in ushering in a wave of peace and civility, in our community, in our homes, and in our most sacred relationships.

Inspirations and footnotes for this sermon:

<http://www.kut.org/post/fewer-refs-could-dim-friday-night-lights-rural-texas>

Ideas and teachings from Jonathan Haidt's book-[The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion](#)

Ask Big Questions Podcast: https://collegecommons.huc.edu/bully_pulpit/rabbi-joshua-feigelson/

<https://icjs.org/sites/default/files/Sacred%20Arguing%20in%20Jewish%20Tradition,%20Rabbi%20Ilyse%20S.%20Kramer.pdf>

https://icjs.org/sites/default/files/Sacred_Arguing_REVISED.pdf

<https://elmad.pardes.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Machloket-lshem-shamayim-for-Lesson-Plan.pdf>