

Can anybody else remember the old cartoons in which Olive Oyl would clasp her hands over her heart, bat her eye lashes and croon, “Oh Popeye, you’re my hero!”? This would happen after he had popped open his can of spinach, grown his muscles, and saved her from the evil Bluto. While it makes us smile today in its sweet simplicity, our need for heroes has always been a part of the human experience. Somebody to guide us, keep us safe, and reassure us against our fears.

Every society has them. Our American heroes include the founding fathers, civil rights Crusaders and Sports stars. But our religious tradition has developed a different type of hero. If I asked you about the Jewish heroes of the Torah, you would probably start with Moses. He was, mostly, really humble! If I asked for another one you would probably think of Abraham, he was mostly really honorable and hospitable. If we kept going you might think of Miriam, she was the first woman with a positive supporting role and even that was understated. Some of you might think of Judah Maccabee – he was mostly focused on killing the Greeks but was happy to murder assimilated Israelites, too. You know that our tradition began with the Hebrew Bible but, was greatly expanded by the era of the classic rabbis who sat around and discussed important ideas with each other.

Most of you will know the word “yeshiva” as a place where boys traditionally learn but, when they mature beyond school age, the practice continues in what’s known as a “Kollel.” This is a place where men engage in and deeply love the process of meaningful discussion – in the form of loving debate, a core element of the chavruta-based dynamic. These are small dyads or triads of deeply connected individuals who create bonds with each other through the act of learning together. In the old days, they used to like to sit around in the evenings and debate – like the salons of the 60’s where real ideas were debated and the interaction was the most important thing, *not* success in convincing the other that you are more right. This was after work, of course. In antiquity, the rabbis all worked hard at their day jobs. That they lived

and worked like the rest of the Israelites was an important influence in their ability to teach Torah - they *were* the everyday man in addition to religious leaders.

They would pick a topic and then, almost for the sake of the debate, they would argue. And the arguments are written down by their students (we call that the Mishnah). In fact, in some traditions to this day, the final test for a student to become a rabbi is to be given the name of a food and to make convincing arguments in *favor* of the food being kosher and then equally convincing arguments to explain how the same food is *treyf*. How's that for being taught to be contrarian!? Moshe Halbertal writes that, "while the Greeks were setting up a society in which laws were the absolute pinnacle of organization, the Jews were setting up a society in which discussion, listening and dissent were the pinnacle – they were codifying laws – we were codifying arguments." That sounds a lot like the way the American judicial system relates to the constitution, doesn't it? We study it, we argue it and in doing so, it stays alive and relevant.

Once the Mishnah was written down by the students of those rabbis, the arguments continued about the arguments. That's what we call the gemara. Put the Mishnah and the gemara together, now you've got the Talmud. The sacred tradition of argument has continued thru history to this very day, – not just with their contemporaries but they argued with the opinions of those who'd died centuries earlier. Rabbi Jeff Roth teaches that this was possible because, though we are taught that each of us stood at Mount Sinai at the moment of revelation, no one of us has the whole picture. Therefore, by engaging with another, we are provided with a piece of truth that we lack.¹ In fact, when you listen to my words, disagreeing with some and embracing others, you are participating in this sacred activity this evening – you are taking your rightful place in the tradition.

Let's take a moment to talk about the values that Judaism emphasizes.

¹ Roth, Jeffrey I., "The Justification for Controversy Under Jewish Law", in Golding, Martin, *Jewish Law and Legal Theory*.

- a. *Emunah* - Faith, we know that one. We are taught to feel a confidence that there is a higher truth to why we're here and how we're interconnected with the universe.
- b. *Anavah* - Humility – This was the greatest compliment the authors of the Torah could think to write about Moses as a eulogy. There were never again others like him, the humblest man who ever lived.²
- c. *Ahavah* - Love – One of the most well-known and centrally important verses of the entire torah is to love your neighbor as yourself³
- d. *Tikkun Olam* - Social action – Rabbi Ira Stone describes it as taking upon oneself the burden of the other⁴ – this is the source of our Commandedness. We go out and we look for ways to make the world better.
- e. *Ipcha m'stabra*⁵ - Never heard of this one? You're not alone.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman teaches us that this Talmudic concept means, “you know, I see this point you're making in a completely different way.” That last one stands out on the list with the others, doesn't it? Faith, Humility, Love, Social Action and *Ipcha M'stabra*?!?

Jewish conversations are deeply cautious to protect against Group think. This is the phenomenon in which one will present an idea – another will agree and before you know it, everyone believes it to be the correct assessment. You've all been in this situation. It seems a decision has been made, unanimously, too quickly. But nobody wants to be the one to stand up, say “hold on a moment” and slow things down. That person can sometimes get the eye rolls or feel the frustration of others around themselves.

American Author, Max Brooks puts it a bit more dramatically when he describes The Tenth Man Rule: if ten people are in a room, and nine agree on how to interpret and respond to

² [Numbers 12:3](#)

³ [Leviticus 19:18](#).

⁴ [Moses Hayyim Luzzatto](#) (Author), [Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan](#) (Translator), [Ira F. Stone](#). [Mesillat Yescharim: The Path of the Upright](#). JPS; Critical ed. Edition. 2010

⁵ Jewish English Lexicon. <https://jel.jewish-languages.org/words/1719>

a situation, the tenth man *must* disagree. His **duty** is to find the best possible argument for why the decision of the group is flawed.”⁶

You might already know that the 1973 Yom Kippur War was very nearly the end of modern State of Israel. Terrible failures of military intelligence and interpretation of that information meant that we almost lost the war. Afterwards, Israeli military intelligence officials established an analytical unit nicknamed “*Ipcha Mistabra*,” using the Talmudic expression meaning “on the contrary” or “the opposite is true.” The purpose of the unit was “to demonstrate that it is possible to reach differing conclusions from the same intelligence data,” and thereby to instill humility and caution in the intelligence process.^{7,8} This means that anyone who thinks the highest levels of military leadership are wrong, has a mechanism through which they can challenge their assumptions without fear of retaliation or repercussions. In fact, they’re required to speak up if they believe their commanders are missing some perspective. Can you imagine this happening in the United States Military?!? Judaism emphasizes the debate – It is part of why the dissenting opinions are codified in our texts, as well. Don’t be afraid of the naysayer – listen carefully to what she says and, instead of asking how she’s wrong, ask yourself how she’s right. The American Ethicist, Carol Giligan, calls this “radical listening” and reminds us that we are always listening to others to find how they’re wrong. And, if it is too difficult to see how they’re right, ask yourself, “why do *they* think they are right?”

There are some wonderful outcomes from approaching a divisive issue in this manner. Rabbi Micah Goodman, senior educator at the Shalom Hartman Institute suggests that it strengthens what best-selling social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt calls “emotional flexibility.”⁹ Just like the example of the rabbi who can make an argument for the purity of the impure food

⁶ <https://www.pacesconnection.com/blog/the-tenth-man-principle>

⁷ <https://forward.com/shma-now/lech-lecha/338159/maybe-the-opposite-is-true/>

⁸ <https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2017/05/21/how-israeli-intelligence-failures-led-to-a-devils-advocate-role.html>

⁹ Haidt, Jonathan. [The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion](#). Vintage Publishing, 2012.

- we are being taught to see purity in that which we've always assumed to be impure. This would mean listening openly to the one whose opinions you find to be most impure but to see the matter thru their eyes and to see it as a pure expression of their truth before dismissing it as wrong or, worse, reprehensible. Abraham, Moses, King David - The biblical hero is the one who is liberated from external authority. But the hero of the Talmud is liberated from internal authority.

Ulla from Pumbedita – traveled to Babylon and learned that one could purchase 3 baskets of dates for a zuz. He asked, “If food is so cheap here, why do they not study more Torah?” That night, the dates made him sick and the next day, he changed his opinion completely, “The baskets of dates here are a lethal poison and it is amazing that they study so much Torah here seeing that they are sick from the dates.”¹⁰ The point of the story is that “he changed his opinion.” He wasn’t afraid to be wrong and to admit it. Do you remember the slurs hurled at politicians who change their views? John Kerry will always be known as the “flip flopper” because he changed his position on issues. In a Jewish context, this is lauded and celebrated as courageous. Liberation for the Jew is found in changing what you thought yesterday.

One of the more famous anecdotes in the Talmud is about Rabbis Hillel and Shammai who argued for three years about the law on a particular matter. Finally, a *bat kol* – a voice from Heaven - came down and proclaimed: “*Eilu v'Eilu divrei Elohim Chayim heyn – v'halachah c'beit rabbi hillel*. Both this one’s words and that one’s words are the words of the living God – and the law will go according to Hillel.” Why, if they were both right, did the decision go with Hillel and not Shammai? Because, we are told, Hillel was more open to hearing what Shammai had to say in his defense and even presented Shammai’s position before his own when making a case.¹¹

¹⁰ Pesachim 88a

¹¹ Eruvin 13b

So the real question we should be asking ourselves is whether we are strong enough and brave enough to free our mind from our own grasp. It's a simple question but its application is somewhat more tricky. I'll tell you what it would look for me.

As one who is deeply concerned about the divisions in our national community, I hate speaking with others about anything divisive. I assume that, if they want to discuss their conservative views with someone they know is liberal, it must be because they either want to fight or to change my mind. Who needs to be a part of *that*? Me, I need to be a part of that and so do you. But it's got to be carefully designed.

I wrote a powerful sermon for tomorrow that I won't be delivering. It was designed to demonstrate this approach of listening carefully to the one you disagree with and using the information they provide to deeply check one's own point of view. I chose the hotly debated issue of Gun Control but, the more I worked and massaged the message, the more frustrated I got. It wasn't going to work - why? Because it wasn't a conversation. And, it needs to be two equals sitting in mutual respect for each other...it cannot come, one-sided from the pulpit...you wouldn't have been able to hear what I was trying to get across. So I want to help create these chevrotas - these dyads of sacred conversation.

As we speak, you're being emailed an invitation and I want you to seriously consider participating. You'll be able to fill in a request form to participate in one of these Crucial Conversations. This is what our tradition knows as "מחלוקת לשם שמים" - *Mahloket l'shem shamayim* – a disagreement that lifts us higher. On the form, you'll self-identify as "a liberal, moderate or conservative" and you'll check the topics you'd be interested in exploring with a safe discussion partner. "Universal Healthcare, Immigration, the role of the federal government to mandate vaccines, or Israel". This is where we really need you conservatives to step forward. There are plenty of liberals at Temple Sinai and, there are plenty of conservatives but they may not appreciate how much we value them.

You'll be matched up with someone else who also heard this sermon and who also wants to have the conversation with you. You'll both assume open minds for yourself and for your partner. You are going because you *really* want to hear their thoughts and you trust that

they really want to hear yours. The goal in this exercise is to see yourself in the other and the other in yourself; forming a powerful relationship built on trust. And it is not the goal to change our mind or the mind of our chevruta - rather, it may simply serve to temper the extremism of our views.

You'll set up a time to meet, maybe for coffee or over zoom. I would recommend that the first meeting doesn't broach the topic at all – This is just a chance to get to know each other. Then, set a time for a second cup of coffee and agree to some ground rules which might include the mutual commitment to:

- a) Open, active, radical listening
- b) No interruptions
- c) Naming the emotions that arise
- d) Gratitude for the other's respect of your opinions.

Then, you'll set a third meeting to return and to share what you've thought about in the interim. Specifically, what did the other share with you that you'd never heard in that way. What made you think further. And perhaps, some change of mind you've had on something thanks to the conversation. And who knows, maybe you'll have developed a friendship with someone that might even lead to a fourth meeting of your own creation - wouldn't that be something?

Our mission at Sinai is to create a space in which each of us can Grow. That concept holds as many meanings as there are members but, in this particular moment in history, I cannot think of a more apt form of growth than pushing ourselves toward the Jewish view of Heroism – That is: to embody the archetype of the “one who learns from all others”¹² and who is ready to have their mind changed.

¹² m. Pirke Avot, 4:1.

