

**The Sin of Certainty:**  
**Differences, Dialogues and Doubts**

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We enter Yom Kippur this year, as Americans and Jews, with a mixture of feelings: of angst, anger and anxiety. Our country and our world feel as if they hold more pain, hatred and acrimony than at any time in recent history. In our personal lives, we carry these feelings, as well. And, so, this Yom Kippur, we sit, we pray and we hope that somehow, against all odds, we will find reason for optimism and experience some healing in the year to come.

Unfortunately, at this moment, there is precious little to give us any degree of confidence that these negative feelings and this sense of hopelessness will be reversed in the foreseeable future. Some say that speaking about these feelings is very much like speaking about the weather: Everyone **talks** about it, but no one **does** anything about it! I am neither cynical nor despondent. Of course, I don't believe that we can solve all the world's problems during the year ahead. But we can begin. And here I invoke the well-known passage from *Pirke Avot*:

*Lo alecha ha-m'lacha lig'mor, v'lo ata ben chorin li hibatel mimena .*

Loosely:

You may not be able to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from adding to the task, your hand and your heart. (Avot)

This year, more than any other year I can recall, we need to do something, and Yom Kippur is the right time to begin. Let's begin with Washington.

Although many believe that Washington DC has never experienced the acrimony and meanness which seems to permeate our nation's capital today, I assure you that is nothing new. John Hay, who served President Abraham Lincoln as a personal secretary in 1862, once characterized Washington DC as "miraculous in meanness and contemptable in cuisine". Since then, things have gotten much better. The food in DC is now pretty good.

But seriously, it would not be helpful or productive to compare the atmosphere of acrimony and divisiveness we feel today with other times in history. Yet, it is instructive, I think, to see how this “mean-spiritedness” began. Who started it? Well, that’s easy.

Simply put, the anger, obstinacy and acrimony came from them, not from us. All we did was to espouse a correct opinion. All we did was tell them that we are right and we “suggested” that they were mistaken.

**Had I been incorrect** in the position I took, I might be guilty of contributing to the problem. But, I **can’t** be held responsible, nor **should** I be held responsible, for acrimony and anger if **I am right in the positions I espouse!**

Today, we stand and beat our breasts as we enumerate all of our sins. This year, however, in response to those who say it was them not us, we must add to our list of sins, the Sin of Certainty. A passage in the Midrash (Leviticus Rabba 9:3) tells a story about Rabbi Yannai which makes this point.

The great scholar, Rabbi Yannai was once walking on the road, when a man came up to him and invited him to his home. Rabbi Yannai agreed. The man hosted the rabbi, serving him food and drink. While they were eating, the rabbi wanted to test his host’s knowledge of Talmud. But his host knew nothing of Talmud. Nor did he know anything of Mishnah or Bible. At which point, Rabbi Yannai says to his host, “Repeat after me: A dog has eaten Rabbi Yannai’s bread”.

The generous host was incensed. How dare you call me a dog!

Rabbi Yannai responded, castigating his host for knowing nothing about Jewish heritage and study: “How have you merited to eat at a table with me?”

The man answered: “Never in my life have I, after hearing evil talk, repeated it to the person spoken of, nor have I ever seen to people quarrelling without making peace between them.

Rabbi Yannai, in a low, almost inaudible voice of embarrassment and remorse, said: How could I call a person a dog when they possess such praiseworthy and laudable attributes.

Rabbi Yannai had quizzed his host and determined that he was ignorant in several ways, that he knew nothing of Jewish texts. Rabbi Yannai was **certain** that his host was an ignorant boor.

But the great rabbi was mistaken. Rabbi Yannai was guilty of the Sin of Certainty: **I am certain that I am right, that he is unworthy to sit at the table with me**, the Rabbi assured himself. Believing that we are right and others are wrong is the kind of certainty in which arrogance resides.

What was needed here was a different response. Like this and so many other complex situations in the world, resolution cannot be found by reducing the discussion to unilateral or monolithic pronouncements. Complex situations are rarely binary. They do not conform to black/white, right/wrong, good/bad determinations, not with respect to Jewish history and not with respect to many things we are seeing today on the world. In our society today, complex issues are summarily dismissed, discredited, ignored, or reduced to 150 characters in the form of a tweet. Consider, for example, immigration.

The United States, for example, like any country, has a right and an obligation to secure its own borders. But, securing borders is not accomplished exclusively by building an impenetrable wall to keep others out. It is not our intent to keep **everyone** out. It is neither our intent to give everyone who **wants, permission to enter**. There are surely people for whom **we** don't want to provide entrance or access. But how to manage immigration is complicated.

This multifaceted issue is one which raises security concerns, moral concerns and human concerns. It is illegal to enter the US as an undocumented immigrant. Yet, for those who are escaping tyranny and danger, whether they live or die may depend on whether or not we send them back. And so, when we witness rallies and hear the din of rowdy mobs shouting: "send them back", we wonder how a blanket statement can be made for every immigrant/illegal alien.

I don't know what the right answer is. Coming from a background of immigrants, who came to this country over a hundred years ago, I cannot imagine what would have happened to me had this mob's message been heeded when my great-grandparents wanted to come to this country.

Sen. John McCain, who died a couple of weeks ago, was known as a great friend of Israel and a principled and energetic supporter of the values in which he believed. But he was also a maverick, adhering to and arguing in favor of, or against, a piece of legislation not on the basis of party but on the basis of his own moral compass. Senator McCain was known for his ability to argue persuasively, to engage in conversation, to articulate and to listen to others address the complicated issues with which we struggle. In short, he spent his career arguing against Certainty. His greatness was in his willingness, at times, to express doubt.

Our government struggles with deep and complex issues. Part of the problem I see, a problem which did not begin only two years ago, is that partisan certainties in government intend to obviate the need public discourse on complex issues. I would like to identify the Sin of Certainty as that which prevents meaningful and principled discussion on important issues.

When we acknowledge doubts, on the other hand, we create an opportunity to listen, to learn and to grow. For some, changing one's mind or supporting an unpopular position is a sign of confusion and weakness. I disagree. We gain strength and, I would hope, respect, for opinions that are principled, motivated by one's inner moral compass and guided by one's desire to be humane.

One thing I learned early on in my marriage is the helpful and, at times, lifesaving, phrase: "but I could be wrong". Initially, I thought that this phrase was an uncomplicated way to save me from being totally, irredeemably and irrevocably damned. But I have come to realize that "I could /might be wrong" is a profoundly important and exquisitely useful phrase which can and should be applied to so much of what we deal with as Jews, as people and as a society today. This language opens, rather than closes, a door. And it is this language which has now appeared on the lists of endangered species.

We are losing the ability to listen to divergent opinions, to consider other alternatives and to suspend our certainty in order to listen to a different point of view. And this requirement to listen, to reflect and to consider different perspectives cannot be simply discarded as fake. Complex matters must be debated and considered, especially when the stature of the country and the fate of the world is at stake.

How deeply are we at odds with one another? In 1994, a survey was released which, among other things, measured partisanship in this country. The study revealed that **only** 16% of Democrats had a “very **unfavorable**” view of the G.O.P. Only 17% of Republicans held a “very **unfavorable**” view of Democrats. Today, 38% of Republicans have “very **unfavorable**” attitudes toward Democrats, 43% of Democrats have “very **unfavorable**” views about Republicans. When the Pew Research Center, as it was reported on in the New York Times, asked Democrats and Republicans to talk about each other, they **both** used the same language to describe the other: close-minded, dishonest, immoral, lazy, unintelligent. (NYTimes Jan. 1, 2018).

In 1994, 16% of Democrats and Republicans couldn't stand each other. Today, the rift between parties has multiplied 2.5 times. 2.5 times more Republicans and Democrats have “very unfavorable” views about the other party. This is what a bifurcated society looks like. We are living in a binary world in which allies are determined by common enemies, by the **certainty** that we are right, and they are wrong. And this results in the frozen dynamic of neither speaking to the other. That needs to change.

When was the last time you engaged in conversation someone whose views were diametrically opposed to your own? Here is your homework: Take a person out for coffee who voted the wrong way on 2016. Listen and don't respond. Can you **not** talk, **not** argue but listen and respond only when they have finished?

On second thought, US politics has become incendiary and I know that, for some, even the thought of such a conversation is fraught with too many emotions. So, if you like, we'll make that discussion optional, for extra credit. For your homework, therefore, consider something easier to discuss: The Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Could we listen to the other side speak, listening from a different perspective? Each point of view is expressed without name calling and insulting labels. Instead, you and your friend would speak personally, about feelings, fears and ultimate goals. Could you do that?

The newly adopted Nation-State Bill has been called by supporters “historic and long-overdue”. Detractors, however, call it, “racist and a threat to Israel's democracy”. Rather than name calling and vitriol, could not each side listen to the other? Could we not find a way, a process, a compromise which would

accomplish the purpose of the Bill while being sensitive to that which many find offensive?

And, more than what we share, how would our discussions about Israel and peace change if I/we were to concede that others have deep and strong roots connecting them to Israel as well? Even though we believe that we are correct, can we listen to the opinions of those who believe we are wrong? They tell a different story, about how they were expelled from their homes in 1948 and were prevented from returning. Can we listen to that?

What would the tenor of the conversation be if we were to listen and, at the end, say, "I believe this land is mine but, I hear your story and understand that, as much as I love this land, you love this land too"?

What if each side could say,

I believe I am right. But I can see how, from your perspective, you think that you are right. Of that **you** are certain, too.

I remember something that Mayor Ed Koch once said: "If you agree with me nine out of twelve times, vote for me. If you agree twelve out of twelve times, see a psychiatrist". No two people can, or should, agree on everything. Can you find a place that you and your coffee date can share?

The Talmud records an intractable argument between the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai over a point of Jewish Law. Unable to resolve the conflict on their own, they turn to God to resolve the conflict: "Which one is right?", they ask. And the response is instructive.

*"Elu v'elu divrei Elohim chayyim"*/ both positions reflect the words of the living God.

This cryptic phrase expresses the essence of a philosophy of pluralism. Two opinions may each be valid even when they oppose one another. Sometimes, there isn't only one right answer. But why is this important, especially because I know that I am right?

The Sin of Certainty results, not in conviction, but in rigidity. Those who embody rigidity may appear strong. But, unless one bends when under pressure, that which is rigid snaps. Instead, we need conversations which include ways to say, I

believe I am right but, I can see, from your perspective, you may think that you are right. But here I must add a caveat.

There are, of course, limits to tolerance and pluralism. Pluralism does not require me to endure hateful language, denigration, and demonization. In Israel, for example, we must rule out, as untenable, negotiations or compromises with those whose ultimate and explicit goal is to kill Jews and eradicate the State of Israel. I will not, nor should I or we tolerate those sorts of comments. But, in conversations between enemies both of whom want peace, there are points where we might agree.

An article in the “Times of Israel” reported that Alan Dershowitz, vacationing at his home on Martha’s Vineyard, had been snubbed on several occasions by neighbors with whom he had been friendly. His refusal to condemn certain policies of the current Administration in Washington had made him a pariah, to the extent that some had withdrawn invitations to come for a barbeque.

I am not worried about Prof. Dershowitz’s social calendar or who is inviting him for dinner. I am concerned, however, about the social acceptability of drawing a line between them and us, between we, who are right and those who are wrong. I am concerned about those who choose not to socialize with those who hold divergent political opinions. We cannot disqualify from our friendships those with whom we disagree politically. One should not need to choose between friendships and politics. In doing so, we simply reinforce our certainty that I am right, and they are wrong.

Beyond discussions about Israeli or American Society, we can look to our personal relationships to find the places where our own sense of certainty has created strife, hurt feelings or caused alienation. How much of your marriage is infected by your certainty that you are correct.? How have your friendships been strained by your sense that **you** were the injured party, that it is **your** certainty which convinces you that it is your friend who owes **you** the apology and not, as they contend, the other way around?

The next time you have an argument, especially when you are convinced that you are right, respond by saying:

I **think** I am right, but I **may be** wrong.

From my perspective, I am convinced that my position is correct, but I can see how, from your perspective, you may see things differently.

Let me know how that conversation goes.

Sir Francis Bacon was a philosopher and statesman who died at the beginning of the 17th century. I must note here that this is the first time that “Bacon” has ever made its way into one of my High Holiday sermons. And here, the insight of Sir Francis Bacon is instructive:

If a person begins with certainties he will end in doubt. But if one begins with doubt, he shall end with certainties.

This point was made forcefully by Learned Hand, known as the greatest American judge never to sit on the Supreme Court. In his famous essay on “The Spirit of Liberty” he wrote: “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right”. (Learned Hand, “The Spirit of Liberty”, 1944)

This year, more than ever, we must beat our breasts and atone for committing the Sin of Certainty. To some it may seem ironic but, in this world, on some of the large and complicated issues we face, it may well be that by avoiding the Sin of Certainty we shall enable the respectful and appropriate conversations we so sorely need on issues which are deeply contested in our country and our world. Perhaps, **we** can be the ones to create that small difference in our interactions which can make a difference, if not in the larger world then in our own lives.

In our complicated and contentious world, we may be right **only** when we can see the other and hear the narrative of those with whom we differ. Perhaps, the message of this moment is to err on the side of doubt. That may not seem like much, but we need to start somewhere and, who knows, maybe that is the place from which a different kind of discourse can begin, the place to plant a vision of hope and optimism, so that kindness and civility can grow once more.