

Love Your Enemies?

One of my favorite stories is about a Rabbi called *Shmuel HaNagid*, “Samuel the Prince.” He was the leader of the Jewish community in Spain in the 11th century. At that time, Spain was still a Muslim country and Samuel served as Vizier to the Kings of Granada from 1027 until his death in 1055. His reputation for wisdom and compassionate behavior endeared him to Jews and Muslims alike. Well, not everyone liked Samuel. Though this was a time that is popularly called the Golden Age of Spain when Muslims and Jews lived in remarkable harmony, there were, as there almost always are, outbreaks of intolerance and bigotry.

One day, a spice merchant went on a rant against Samuel, shouting terrible anti-Semitic curses against him. The spice merchant belonged to a movement of fanatical Muslims. He was outraged that a Jew was a leader in a Muslim country. When the King heard that Samuel had been so abused, he immediately had the merchant arrested. For the crime of offending one of his most important ministers, the King ruled that the merchant’s tongue was to be cut out. And to reinforce Samuel’s prominence in the court, the King wanted Samuel to carry out the punishment. But instead of carrying out the punishment, Samuel forgave the merchant and sent him free.

Sometime later, the King and Samuel were walking in the market. This time, the spice merchant came up to Samuel and showered him with words of praise and appreciation. The King turned to Samuel saying: “I thought I told you to have that man’s tongue cut out.” Samuel responded, “I did. I had his angry tongue removed and have given him a tongue of kindness as a replacement.”

By handling the situation the way he did, Shmuel HaNagid turned an enemy into a supporter. His self-control was exhibited on two levels. First, he controlled his own reaction so that he did not respond to anger with anger; that would only have escalated the situation. Second, he showed compassion and forgiveness and, thereby, turned his attacker into a supporter. By handling this very difficult situation so well, he enhanced his reputation among all the people in the land. What could have been a divisive issue that pitted Muslims and Jews against one another was turned into an example of tolerance and respect.

I was reminded of Shmuel HaNagid’s story when I heard Arthur Brooks, one of the guest speakers at this year’s AIPAC Policy conference in Washington, D.C. as he spoke about his new book: Love Your Enemies. AIPAC is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee; its annual Policy conference is one of those rare events where people who have different

backgrounds and different political affiliations gather in unity. Over 18,000 attend: Democrats and Republicans, Jews and Christians, religious and secular, Asian, African American, Hispanic, and White, Conservative and Liberal, over 4,000 students and many Holocaust survivors. The only things that they all have in common are a desire to strengthen America's relationship with Israel and a commitment to secure Israel's welfare. It was a perfect forum for a book called Love Your Enemies.

Brooks is a columnist for the Washington Post and is a new faculty member of Harvard Business School. His book is a passionate effort to address and help fix the widening political and social divisions that threaten our nation, as well as our personal relationships. He identifies the root of the problem as our national "culture of contempt." Contempt is far worse than anger. When we express anger at someone it is usually our emotional attempt to change their behavior. Contempt, however, is an expression of pure scorn or, as the 19th century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer put it, contempt is "the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another." In other words, that person is not even worth our anger.

At the AIPAC Policy Conference, people come from different religious and cultural backgrounds; they come from opposing political affiliations, but they do not treat each other with contempt. In great part that is because of

their mutual goal of wanting to support of Israel. But on a deeper level, simply being among others with whom you might have little in common, being among people with whom you might disagree on most issues, helps to break down social barriers and suspicions. Unfortunately, finding venues where people can respectfully interact with those from different ideological perspectives is becoming increasingly rare. Our growing isolation from one another breeds suspicion, mistrust and contempt. And just as our nation is reeling from the body blows that Republicans and Democrats, Liberals and Conservatives inflict on one another, the problem of contempt is felt much closer to home. It is affecting and threatening our most precious relationships: our friendships and marriages.

Social Psychologist and Professor John Gottman of the University of Washington has widely published his findings concerning the likelihood that certain couples will divorce. Again, it is not anger that signals a looming separation or divorce. Rather, it is contempt. Sarcasm, sneering, hostile humor and eye-rolling are acts that effectively say, "You are worthless" to the one person you once said that you love more than any other (Brooks, p.23). That contempt is poisonous to our relationships has been well-established. It is also injurious to our mental and physical health. According to the American Psychological Association, the feeling of rejection that is often

the result of being treated with contempt increases anxiety, depression, and reduces performance on intellectual tasks. It affects sleep quality and our immune systems. It has been clinically proven that contemptuous words and actions threaten the health of our relationships and adversely affect our physical well-being (p.26).

Did the coarsening of behavior on the national level lead to an increase in our contemptuous behavior toward one another? Or are our leaders simply reflecting back to us our own dysfunctions? It doesn't really matter which came first. What matters is that we are experiencing a vicious cycle of mean-spiritedness and it will only get worse if we don't do something to about it. I'm sure that many of you share my sense of urgency.

A fierce political landscape is nothing new. Just in my own lifetime, there was the assassination of Jack Kennedy, anti-war riots against LBJ, violent protests at political conventions and on college campuses, Watergate and Richard Nixon's resignation, assassination attempts against Gerald Ford and then Ronald Reagan, the impeachment trial of Bill Clinton, and the birther attacks against Barak Obama. But now, with the impeachment process started against Donald Trump and no-holds barred races for the Presidency, Senate and House of Representatives, the fabric of our society is under enormous stress.

Still, it is important to keep in mind that disagreement is essential to a democracy. Indeed, we can only have a democracy when we have viable parties that represent different points of view. A nation dominated by one party is a dictatorship; it suffers from the kind of social and political oppression evidenced in both Russia and China. For all our problems, at least Americans have a choice, and for that we should be grateful. The problem is not that we have sharp disagreements. Rather, it is in the contemptuous attitude that is prevailing in our debates with one another. In 1960, only 5 percent of Americans said they would be upset if their child married someone who voted for the other political party. In 2010, the number was 40%. I'm pretty sure that over the past ten years, that figure has grown.

The theme of Brook's book, Love Your Enemies, is that we should not be contemptuous or make enemies of those with whom we have a disagreement. It is a message that is familiar to us because it is an amplification of the Torah verse we will read this afternoon: *Ve-ahavta le'rei'akha ka'mokha, You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" (Leviticus 19:18).

Arthur Brooks wanted to expand the ideal of loving your neighbor so that it includes even those who you consider enemies.

While I certainly appreciate the sincerity and good intentions of his message, I'm afraid that loving enemies is not realistic. For that matter, the Talmudic sage Hillel thought that loving your neighbor may not be possible. Therefore, he expressed it in a way that makes more sense: "*That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow*" (Shabbat 31a). Hillel understood that while we are not capable of truly loving everyone, we are capable of modifying our behavior so that we do not mistreat anyone.

Of course, even Brooks admitted that sociopaths are unlovable enemies. And as we are so acutely aware, the world certainly has an overabundance of sociopaths.

Just limiting our focus to the current social situation in the United States, we see bigots and racists are more and more emboldened. Anti-Semitism is skyrocketing. The murderous attacks against synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway were perpetrated by criminals who fed on hate sites on the Web. And while organizations like the ADL monitor the worst of these sites, much of the hate content is being sent by unidentified trolls. Crude, racist, bigoted, anti-Semitic, sexist and homophobic rants go viral, threatening our sense of security and dignity. Students in one of our own local high schools distributed a Snapchat photo with the caption: "Me and the boys bout to exterminate the Jews." College kids and national leaders pose in blackface.

Bullying ultra-nationalists spew their strong-armed threats. Some of us here this morning have received messages that go well beyond a simple disagreement. And some of those messages contain hints of violence. We might try blocking their emails, texts and calls. We might petition the court to issue a restraining order to keep those creeps away, but we know that only by investing in a professional security presence, building strong deterrence and being constantly on the alert will we feel safe.

If the incidents of social media rage and rants were only evidenced by extremists and sociopaths, it would be too much. But we all know that otherwise decent people can also distribute blogs and Twitter feeds that carry unfiltered, impulsive and ill-considered comments to thousands, if not millions, of people. The sad fact is that we all contribute to the coarsening of society when we indulge in *Lashon HaRa*: contemptuous speech.

Lashon HaRa includes malicious gossip, spreading rumors, mocking and denigrating others.

In the *Vidui*, the confession of our sins that we will recite later this Yom Kippur morning, again and again the theme turns to the pain we cause through the things we say:

Al Chet Shechatanu l'fanekha: for the ways we have wronged You through lies and deceit (*b'khachash uv'chazav*);

Al Chet Shechatanu l'fanekha: for the wrongs committed in routine conversations (*b'siach siftoteinu*);

Al Chet Shechatanu l'fanekha: for the wrongs be committed through gossip and rumor (*birchilut*).

What we might dismiss as a mere offhand comment or a lame joke can nevertheless cause real harm. What we think is harmless gossip may make the target feel ridiculed, isolated and rejected. When it comes to the sins of *Lashon HaRa*, we all are perpetrators and we all are victims. We have all felt the emotional toll and humiliation caused by hurtful words. The old saying: "Sticks and stones may hurt my bones but words will never hurt me," well, that simply isn't true. We all hurt. We all have caused others to hurt.

If only we could decrease, even a little bit, the pain we inflict on one another through the things we say and write. That is the ambitious dream of dozens of local synagogues and Jewish institutions who are partners in the Colorado Clean Speech initiative. Throughout the coming year we'll have classes, programs and discussions to explore ways in which we can create a social environment that is nicer, more respectful and conscious of the power words. I've already addressed this topic in sermons, in my weekly message that we send out in the Sinai Snippets, and in classes like the

Selichot program we had a few weeks ago. The response has been very encouraging. We know that we can do better with the way we communicate with one another. We know, just like Hillel, that even if we can't "love our neighbors," we most certainly are capable of controlling our behavior so that we do not mistreat anyone.

There will always be disputes. People who care deeply about issues will advocate for their positions with passion. Our Jewish tradition honors the importance of debate. In the Talmud and Rabbinic literature we find many examples of those fiercely fought debates, some of which got very heated.

But the highest form of debate was described as a *machloket le-shem Shamayim*, a dispute for the sake of a Heaven. Defeating your ideological opponent was not the goal. Rather, the goal was to test each other's views in order to determine the best way to help the greater community and lift the lives of others. Likewise, when the great competing schools of Hillel and Shamai disputed an issue, it was said: *Elu ve-elu divrei Elohim*

Chayim: "This one and that one are both holy and worthy positions" (Eruvim 13b).

The validity of opposing points of view was emphasized.

So, it can be with husbands and wives, children and parents, siblings, and friends, neighbors and fellow congregants. Even when we are in dispute, as long as we share the goal of mutual well-being, then we are partners,

not combatants. So, it can be with Democrats and Republicans, Liberals and Conservatives. Let them debate, but let us not forget that we are all citizens of this United States of America, *E Pluribus Unum*, Out of many, one. Let us do our part to create a friendlier, more compassionate and respectful world. Who knows, maybe even our political leaders will join the movement or at least tone down the biting rhetoric and contempt. Now that would truly be an answer to our prayers.

On this Day of Atonement, this Holy Day of Yom Kippur, let us pledge to be more mindful of the things that we express. As it is written:

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of my heart be acceptable to You, O God (Psalm 19:15). *Amen.*