

ROSH HASHANAH  
SECOND DAY  
5771

How many jokes are there about Jews arguing with each other? Many! But really it is no laughing matter, is it? Our rabbis tell us the reason that Jerusalem and the Second Temple were destroyed was because of the contention among the Jews of that time—in Hebrew, *sinat chinam*. This Talmudic narrative about what led to almost 2000 years of exile helps explain why many of us are worried about the contention that exists today among Jews.

Every month when we bless the new moon—*Birkat HaChodesh*—we include the interesting phrase that “all Israel are friends—*chaverim kol Yisrael*.” The entire prayer is an expression of hope for the month ahead and therefore, *chaverim kol Yisrael* is not a statement of what is but expresses our hope for what will be; namely, all Jews finally getting along. It really has never been the case, has it?

Our Bible is full of contention among families, tribes and leaders. Chanukkah is the story of a Jewish civil war, there were the Sadducees and Pharisees, Rabbinites and Kairites, rationalists and mystics, hasidim and misnagdim, Reform and Orthodox, Zionists and anti-Zionists, eastern and western European Jews. A number of these historical conflicts have played out here in Cincinnati and in some significant ways still do. Our concern is heightened because the overall atmosphere in the United States is one of more polarization, accusation and condemnation of Americans by Americans.

Our tradition has always appreciated the importance of argument and debate provided it is for the right reasons and done respectfully. Hillel tells us that an argument for the sake of heaven will endure but an argument not for the sake of heaven will not. What determines whether an argument is for the sake of heaven? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of modern Orthodoxy, teaches that an argument is for the sake of heaven if those engaged in it are not concerned with being right but only concerned with learning what is right. Too many of us are concerned with being right. *Sefer Hasidim*, a 12<sup>th</sup> century German text, observes that a person gains little from being right as compared to what a person may learn from discovering he or she is wrong. These teachings are so counter-current to the prevailing behavior in our country, including our own.

Sunday is the Fast of Gedaliah. Gedaliah was the last Jewish governor of Judea, appointed by Nebuchadnezzar after the Babylonian conquest in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE; he was assassinated by another Jew who accused him of collaborating with the Babylonians. Jay Michaelson writes that the High Holy Days are for us to rise above our base desires and learn to control our emotions so that we do not speak or act out of anger, jealousy or unbridled passion. The assassination of Gedaliah commemorated between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur sadly reminds us that we are obligated to behave rationally and respectfully in the face of our differences and disagreements and reminds us of how often we have not.

What justification is there for a Jew in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to murder another Jew because he disagreed with his leadership or for a Jew in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to murder the Prime Minister of Israel because he, his friends, teachers and rabbis disagreed with Yitzchak Rabin’s positions? What leads Jews in Israel to throw rocks at other Jews because they observe their Judaism differently or to call Jewish soldiers and policemen Nazis and throw garbage on them as these police and soldiers endeavor to uphold the laws of the State of Israel? Is this behavior different from what our rabbis maintained was the cause for the destruction of Jerusalem 2000 years ago?

Kathryn Schulz in her book “Being Wrong,” is interested in why people love being right. She points out that unlike chocolate, sex and other things, being right does not enjoy any mainline access to our biochemistry. She notes that we cannot enjoy kissing anyone and everyone but most people relish being right about almost anything and everything all the time. She, like Rabbi Hirsch and *Sefer Hasidim*, finds value in being wrong, knowing you are wrong and benefiting from what we learn from this awareness.

I remember back in high school being fascinated with the debate team. I was not a debater but I thought it was really cool that to be on the debate team you had to be able to represent both sides of any given issue. Our Talmud includes elaborate and lengthy discussions to teach us the importance of considering, reflecting upon and arguing respectfully about different views and positions. Many minority opinions are included in our Talmud to ensure that those in the majority do not become authoritarian and for both majority and minority to learn how to respect one another. Our rabbis established a standard and an expectation for respectful disagreement that would be good for us to strive to live by today.

Our rabbis tell us that the Torah was given in the wilderness to teach that learning and wisdom require open spaces in order to inspire us to open our hearts and minds. Debating and arguing respectfully and for the purpose of learning what is right—not being right—requires such openness if we are to appreciate the complexities of life and the world we live in. It requires us to not reduce everything to good guys and bad guys, liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, AIPAC and J-Street. It requires Jews at the end of the day, beyond differences and disagreements, to be able to *daven* together, have Shabbat together, comfort each other during *shivah*, fast together on Yom Kippur and dance together at Simchat Torah and Purim.

If this is to occur, we have to be respectful, we have to listen, we have to allow ourselves to be receptive to different ways of seeing things and be open to change. It is critically important to have family and friends who challenge us and question our views and not only be with people who are just like us mutually endorsing each other. It is important to read, for example, opinion pieces and attend lectures and programs that challenge us and make us think. How else can we maintain our intellectual integrity and guard against knee jerk party line like responses? Remember Rabbi Bunam's teaching from yesterday that we have to leave home, leave our comfort zones, if we are to discover the truth. One exercise is to learn how to argue with yourself as if you are a one person debate team arguing both sides of an issue. I cannot stress enough how important of a spiritual and intellectual discipline this is.

Talk radio is the antithesis of this; it is harmful and too often hateful. I recommend, no, I recommend strongly, that no one should listen to any talk radio be it liberal or conservative. Nothing on talk radio contributes to there being more open-mindedness, understanding and wisdom. The hosts keep getting richer as their audiences keep getting further and further away from anything our tradition, our ethics and even our own common sense tell us is worthwhile, helpful or healing. There is too much hate and fear conveyed in these programs. None of us, independent of our political affiliations and positions should enable in any way this desecration of *mentshlikh* and thoughtful dialogue and debate.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said: "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear." Fear breeds hate and where this is hate there is fear. People hate Jews, people hate Muslims, people hate GLBTQ folks and people hate immigrants. People hate liberals, people hate conservatives, people hate Democrats, people hate Republicans, people hate black folk and people hate white folk. People hate the president, people hate the people who hate the president, people hate women, people hate men, people hate themselves and people hate G-d. There is not a chance in heaven that any of this will change until different people can sit down together respectful of differences in politics, religion, gender, sexuality and race. No theology, religious practice or code of behavior merits our adherence and devotion that requires anything less of us.

An example of an argument that can be for the sake of heaven is the debate around the environment and global warming. Given what is at stake—our planet that there is only one of for rich or poor, Jew or Christian, liberal or conservative—one would think we could come together on this. Indeed, some fundamentalist evangelical Christians are working with secular environmentalists on protecting our planet for the future. Here are folks who could not be more in disagreement on so many serious issues such as abortion, Jesus and G-d to name but a few but who for the sake of everyone's well-being are able to transcend their differences for a higher purpose. Our Torah, as I shared yesterday, commands us to be guardians of the earth and an ancient Midrash relates how G-d instructs us to know that if we fail to do so, if we destroy this world there will be no other; all life will end for all time. Rabbinic law requires us to never take any chances even when there is simply a concern that something may be harmful or dangerous, to never take a risk when something may possibly be damaging; this is known in

Hebrew as *sefeik sakanat nefesh*. Therefore, independent of our personal political positions and politics entirely as Jews we need to come together and take no risks whatsoever, erring on the side of caution, as to the environmental future of our planet.

I know the following concern is sensitive and for some controversial. I speak of health care reform in our country. I do not know enough about health care to tell you what the fix is, what is required. I do know that Judaism is unequivocally committed to health care. I know that we are of a historical people that commands us to take care of our own health and that of others to the best of our ability. I also know that these commandments and values have been internalized so deeply over so many centuries that the Jewish people have given birth to some of the greatest and most compassionate healers, physicians and medical researchers the world has ever known including today. I also know that in the one and only Jewish country in the world, Israel, everyone has health care—everyone! Not just emergency room care and sick care, but preventative care, pre-natal care, well baby care and much more. Let us argue intensely and extensively about how to provide the best health care for everyone in our country but, please G-d, let us not argue whether to do so or not.

Every Jew independent of denomination must agree that for food truly to be kosher it must not violate ethical, legal and environmental laws and standards. If it does than *glatt kosher* becomes *glatt treif*. How any argument among rabbis continues over this is mind-boggling and concerning. If kashrut has anything to do with G-d, how can anything be kosher if it involves abusing G-d's children, G-d's animals and G-d's world?

I would love to see throughout this country Orthodox rabbis returning to their local boards of rabbis including here in Cincinnati where despite our differences—some very significant—we could and would focus on what we share in common to work on behalf of our community, Israel and our people. I would enthusiastically embrace them if and when they do. There are many issues today among the present membership of the Greater Cincinnati Board of Rabbis, all non-Orthodox rabbis, which could divide us but do not; we do not ignore our differences but we focus on our shared values, commitments and concerns so that we can work together. It is healthy to have a diversity of thought, interpretation and position among leaders because this is how new ideas and new ways of looking at things are born which in turn lead to new efforts and endeavors so that our community can grow, be healthy and strong.

Years ago Rabbi Heschel said what Jews should be arguing about is not whether swordfish is kosher but whether the atomic bomb is. Today, there are so many urgent issues to debate and discuss. Arguments about the environment, immigrants, war, the death penalty, stem cell research, alternative energy research and development, health care, election reform, tax cuts and gay marriage are serious and necessary debates. The same is true in Israel regarding debates as to whether Israel is becoming more of a theocracy, the absence of religious pluralism and even what Zionism is as reflected in how the Jewish Agency under Natan Scharansky has recently redefined its mission. Of course, the argument this summer resulting from the Rotem Conversion Bill is not over yet. All of these issues and debates demand a great deal of us to stay on task to ensure that they will be for the sake of heaven. By the way, they now serve swordfish in kosher restaurants in Israel.

Every year when our Nominating Committee prepares to meet, I am asked if I have any input. My only instruction is that everyone nominated to our Board and Officer Group needs to be a person who can discuss, debate and even disagree without ever being disagreeable. Our synagogue works hard on ensuring that how we do the mitzvah of governance at our shul is for the sake of heaven. Per yesterday's sermon, it is hard work but holy work to disagree without being disagreeable. Our country, including the American Jewish community, has too much disagreeing that is much too disagreeable.

As Jews, as Americans and as people, we need to learn to carry on arguments that are for the sake of heaven; arguments where we are not concerned about being right, proving ourselves right or proving others to be wrong. Arguments for the sake of heaven are those where we want to learn what is right celebrating when we learn we are wrong even being thankful because we will then benefit from knowing what is right. Self-righteousness and judgmentalism are sure signs that an argument is not for the sake of heaven. Mean-spiritedness and know-it-allness are sure signs that an argument is not for the sake of heaven. Arguments fueled by triumphalism and

character defamation are not for the sake of heaven. Arguments filled with hostility and anger, arrogance and self-promotion are not for the sake of heaven.

Arguments that help us have a better understanding of each other and lead us to consider other viewpoints are for the sake of heaven. Arguments where we respect each other as being equally created in the image of G-d are for the sake of heaven. Arguments that bring more compassion, justice and peace to the world are for the sake of heaven. Arguments where we are listening and not just thinking of what we want to say next are for the sake of heaven. Arguments that bring forth our shared concern, commitment, sensitivity and hope are for the sake of heaven.

What have we argued about in the past year and how did we argue? In the year ahead, what arguments will we be engaged in? How will we argue and what is it we want to learn and accomplish? Will our arguments help make more of us friends, *chaverim*, and make us more understanding and caring people? If so, they are for the sake of heaven. Whatever we may debate and disagree on, let us all do so in ways that are *mentshlikh* and not disagreeable and in ways that will never preclude our davening together, having Shabbos together, comforting one another and dancing together as Jews and as human beings on this one planet we share. So, whether we stand for the Sh'ma or sit, let our custom be that we respect, hear and listen to one another. Indeed, this is hard work, this is holy work. And regarding issue, I will accept no argument.