

Rosh Hashanah 5784 First Morning: The Culture of Disagreement

No fanatic ever believed they were the fanatic. It's always the other person. The extremist is always someone else. The intolerant one is always someone else. The one you can't debate with is always someone else. We always see ourselves as the good ones, the reasonable ones, the wise ones, the ones willing to compromise.

I wouldn't be telling you anything new by saying that we are living in times where the level of verbal violence, political discord, and societal division is at a historic peak. But let's not be naive; let's not believe this is something entirely new, something that has never happened before. In fact, I would say we are doing much better than in the past. In the Stone Age, any tribal argument ended with one or more dead. In the Middle Ages, every religious and political dispute, whether internal or external, concluded with wars that could last for years, if not decades. Sure, we still have much to learn about how to debate without fighting, how to discuss with wisdom, how to prevent our political differences from further dividing us. However, we must begin by acknowledging that we are much better off than centuries ago.

Tonight, I'd like to dedicate this sermon to *Machloket*, the Jewish culture of disagreement and debate. We like to claim that we are a people where questions, inquiries, debates, and freedom of opinion are welcome. Still, sometimes we romanticize this idea, or we merely pay lip service to it when our brother votes for a president we detest or our sister-in-law supports a law we consider incorrect.

What can Judaism teach us to better understand each other? What can our tradition offer to improve public discourse?

It Wasn't Always Rosy

We often hear that we should follow the example of Hillel and Shammai, who, in the early 1st century CE, were the great sages of Rabbinic Judaism. They disagreed on significant points of Jewish law, with one saying A while the other said B. According to the *Tosefta*, "they never stopped marrying their children to one another nor lending utensils to each other for their homes." This is a beautiful, ideal image of what civilized debate should be. However, it's often just an ideal, a romanticization by scholars centuries later who wanted to imagine a glorious and harmonious past. The Talmud tells us that once, when the schools of Shammai and Hillel couldn't agree on a matter, they voted, Hillel's school won, and that night, Shammai's students killed all of Hillel's students.

In our day, we often hear that "never before in the history of the country (whether the United States, Israel, Argentina, etc.) have political discussions reached such extremes," breaking relationships within families, generating verbal violence among friends, and sometimes leading to physical violence in the streets. Let's remember (as I mentioned earlier today), let's read history; not every past was better. In every generation, there have been intense debates, family and friendship ruptures, verbal and physical violence. Such is politics; it relies more on passion than reason, and passion often awakens our more animalistic side. There's nothing new under the sun, as *Kohelet* said 3000 years ago; there's nothing new in today's political (or

religious) debates. *Don't romanticize the past, and don't exaggerate the present. That's the first lesson.*

Talmudic Lessons

Although, as I mentioned earlier, not every discussion in the Talmud ended with colleagues embracing, toasting with L'chaim, and singing Kumbaya, the Talmud is a colossal lesson in building a community through dialogue and debate. There isn't a page in the Talmud that doesn't contain a discussion with more than one viewpoint on some legal matter. Here are a couple of Talmudic lessons that can help us think about improving our political debates today:

1. The Teachings of the Schools of Hillel and Shammai:

- a. **The Voice of the Minority:** The Mishnah (and the Talmud) may not necessarily be legal codes, but they do seek to understand what the law (halacha) is for every aspect of Jewish life. This law is established by the majority's vote. However, in both documents, the positions of the minorities, the voices in the debate that were not victorious, are still remembered and recorded. Why, you may ask? The Mishnah (Eduyot 1:4-5) gives us two possibilities: (1) "So that if a court prefers the opinion of the single person, it may depend on him." (2) "So that if a man shall say, 'Thus have I received the tradition,' it may be said to him, 'According to the [refuted] opinion of that individual did you hear it.'" On the one hand, in every debate, we should record the opinion of the non-victorious party, the minority position, because in the future, that position might make more sense in the face of new social realities and could be used as a source to change the prevailing law. On the other hand, if someone continues to insist on a position that was rejected by the authorities, you can tell them, "Yes, this is a position that so-and-so stated, but we rejected it and decided to go in a different direction." The point here is that in every debate, we should put the non-winning opinion in writing because it may prove valuable later, and we should use it to refine our ideas.
- b. **Wisdom in Debate:** The Talmud (Yevamot 13b) tells us that generally, Jewish law follows the opinions of Hillel rather than Shammai (except in honorable exceptions). But why is that? Was Hillel wiser? Not necessarily. Did he have more followers? Not necessarily. It was simply because "It is because the students of Hillel were kind and gracious. They taught their own ideas as well as the ideas from the students of Shammai. Furthermore, they even taught Shammai's opinions first." The way they debated is what made them stand out in history. Today, in a world where political (and familial) debates are filled with insults, demeaning others, and dismissing their viewpoints, let's remember that our Judaism descends from Hillel, not Shammai, because they were kind and gracious even in the heat of debate. They were intelligent enough not to silence the opinions and positions of their opponents but to cite them in the debate and present counterarguments. In a world where we often prefer to silence those who don't think like us, Hillel invites us to cite them and counter each of their arguments.
- c. **For the Sake of Heaven:** One of the most important points for a successful debate is to ask ourselves: What is our goal in debating, to win or to find the best solution? When we debate, do we want only to impose our position, or are we willing to be influenced and change our opinion? Pirkei Avot (5:17) presents these two styles of debate with

examples: Hillel and Shammai engaged in debates "for the sake of heaven." Of course, each party in the conflict believed they were right! Of course, each side in the debate wanted their position to win! Yet both parties in dispute shared the notion that ultimately, the most important thing was to arrive at the most correct interpretation of the Torah. So, in many instances, the Talmud tells us that the School of Shammai changed their minds and accepted Hillel's position. Even the School of Hillel, on more than one occasion, said that it "turned and began to teach as the School of Shammai did." This is debate "for the sake of heaven." It's for the pursuit of knowledge, not for personal honor or pride. These are the disputes we continue to study to this day because both present a partial truth, and they do it not for their honor or pride but for the sake of knowledge. These are the disputes that will last forever and be reborn in each generation. This is the kind of debate we should aspire to.

2. Seek Critics, Not Flatterers:

In a debate, we all prefer those who applaud us over those who criticize us. On a Facebook post, we all prefer those who give us likes over those who comment and question us. We all, we should admit, prefer flatterers over critics. Avot deRabi Natan (29:1) suggests that we have two types of friends: those who criticize us and those who flatter us. And then it suggests, "Love those who criticize you and hate those who flatter you because those who criticize you will bring you to the World to Come, while those who flatter you will take you out of this world." Contrary to our common sense, those who flatter and celebrate everything we say or do generate too much ego and do not allow us to see our own faults. In contrast, those who criticize help us see our mistakes and improve our behavior and arguments. The Talmud illustrates this point with the relationship between the sages Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish. For years, they were Bar Plugta, a pair of colleagues in dispute. When Reish Lakish died, Rabbi Yochanan mourned because he had no one to study and debate with him. To ease his pain, the Sages decided to send another great sage to be his study partner. For every argument Rabbi Yochanan made, his new colleague brought 24 arguments that supported his argument. Rabbi Yochanan cried even more, and they told him, "Don't you know that I'm right? Don't bring arguments that support my position; be like Reish Lakish, who brought 24 objections to each of my arguments so I could refine my ideas." We all prefer flatterers to critics, and in a debate, we all feel happy when our posts are liked or when we receive congratulations and agreement after a meeting. Nevertheless, we don't need an echo chamber to reinforce our own beliefs; we need friends, colleagues, and companions who, with love and respect, won't flatter us but will seek our errors to help us improve. Those are the real friends.

3. The Difference Between Truth and Majority Decision:

One of the most important points in debating is to understand the crucial difference between "truth" and the majority decision after a vote. Repeat after me: just because something is voted on doesn't make it true, and the minority position is not necessarily wrong! Democratic decisions seek consensus, not truth! Nothing illustrates this point better than one of the most cited stories in the Talmud: the debate between the rabbis and Rabbi Eliezer over the famous oven of Achnai. Without getting into the details of the debate, all the sages argued that a certain oven was impure, while Rabbi Eliezer maintained it was pure. Rabbi Eliezer tried for hours to win the debate with logical arguments and verses from the Bible. The sages ignored

his arguments. He then asked for miracles from Heaven to prove that he was right. God performed miracles: trees started flying, rivers reversed their course, and even God's voice from heaven declared that Rabbi Eliezer was correct in this argument. You might think the debate would end there, but not in the Talmud. A sage stood up and said to God, "Don't interfere; since You gave us the Torah, there's a system that says we must follow the majority." God laughed and said, "My children have defeated me." The truth was on Rabbi Eliezer's side (God Himself said so), but the halacha, the law, was determined by the majority vote. When we debate, or when we attend debates, we should never forget this story: just because something is voted on doesn't mean it's true, and just because something is the minority position doesn't mean it's wrong. Democracy doesn't seek truth but conflict resolution and solutions. If you win a debate, don't think that truth is on your side; only the vote is! If you lose the debate, even if you still believe you're right, don't be like Rabbi Eliezer; accept the majority position. That's part of the democratic process.

4. Warriors and Friends:

When Jews stopped having armies about 1900 years ago, the Rabbis transformed their study academies, the yeshivas, into battlefields, and each of their students into soldiers. The sages are called gladiators, squires, and soldiers in the battle of knowledge. In any yeshiva, you won't find the solemn silence of a library but the shouts of a football stadium. Two students sit at a table, passionately debating the interpretation of a biblical verse or a passage from the Talmud. War cries can be heard. However, the Talmud clarifies that while studying and debating, both are soldiers facing off in the battle of knowledge. But when the day of study ends, they must both leave as friends.

We can't avoid debating passionately! We can't refrain from discussing with fervor! It's part of who we are; we can't be indifferent and just mumble when something really bothers us, when we genuinely disagree. And so, we must argue passionately (with both our Latin and Jewish fervor). But after the debate concludes, we must remember that we have a friend, a colleague, a teacher, a partner, a brother, or a mother in front of us. "Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba says: Even a father and his son, or a rabbi and his student, who are engaged in Torah Together in one gate become enemies with each other due to the intensity of their studies. But they do not leave there until they love each other." (b. Kidushin 30b). **We are opponents for a moment during the family dinner or in some committee, but afterward, we must see each other as friends, as what we truly are.** This is also said about Hillel and Shammai: "they behaved with love and friendship toward one another, as it says in Zechariah, 'TRUTH and PEACE they loved' (8:19)."

Conclusion

In a world and a society that are increasingly divided and have a great inability to debate civilly, it's wonderful to immerse ourselves in the Talmud and try to find tools in our own tradition to improve ourselves. And dear friends, don't ask politicians to debate more civilly if we can't do it with our friends. To summarize, this is the manual of a good "debater" according to Judaism:

1. Debate with passion but with the humility to know that you might be wrong.

2. Don't debate to win; debate to learn more.
3. Always treat your opponent with love, respect, and generosity.
4. Never forget that just because something is voted on doesn't mean it's true.
5. Don't silence the opposing position. Always cite the arguments and positions of the other side and then refute them.
6. Don't seek flatterers but rather critics.
7. Remember that you are only facing a soldier during the debate; afterward, you are facing a friend.
8. And never forget that in Hebrew, the word "Machloket," debate, contains the word "chelek," which means "a part." Remember that in a debate, in a Machloket, you only have a "chelek," a part, of the whole truth.

Shanah Tovah uMetukah! (Happy and Sweet New Year!)
Rabbi Uri