

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5774: Where We Stand

Earlier this summer I was driving home from one of the “Moral Monday” protests in Raleigh. As I drove, I felt deep appreciation for our Social Action Committee, Board, and indeed our congregation’s support for and participation in the weekly rallies to protect voter’s rights, access to healthcare, public education, the environment and employment benefits. And then, faster than a speeding BMW on I-40, my mind turned from the mass gatherings in Raleigh to a scene from nearly thirty years ago: On my college campus, known for its activist student life, classmates were passionately protesting in front of the student union. I saw them first from a distance -- chanting, carrying signs, marching in an endless circle. Curious, I drew closer -- and discovered that the signs were blank, and the words being chanted were simply “No” and “Never.” What was going on? Students were protesting the ubiquity and sometimes self-righteous nature of protest on campus. The “cause of the day” was protest itself.

The “protest protest” rally was a clever act of satire, but also suggested something deeper: It was an expression of frustration with polarized politics in which different constituencies really don’t engage with one another in productive, meaningful debate.

I support, strongly, the goals of Moral Monday’s organizers, and count myself among its participants; and yet I have found the term “Moral Monday” unsettling since the beginning. Driving home from Raleigh that day, I realized why. For those of us who are old enough, it intentionally echoes Jerry Falwell’s “Moral Majority” of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and it’s a powerful name for exactly the same reason: It suggests that only one side in the debate is concerned about doing what is right. Proponents might well argue that they’re not the first to claim the moral high ground, they’re reclaiming it -- but that is the equivalent of a child arguing “I didn’t hit the other kid, I just hit *back*.” It doesn’t help resolve the problem. Despite the merits of the cause and the power of the name, the phrase “Moral Monday” itself contributes to the polarized atmosphere that many of us find so discouraging.

Often, when people discuss political issues, the question is “which side is the right one to take?” We’ll discuss our tradition’s response to that in a little while. First, though, I’d like to look at a different but related question: What can Judaism teach us about *how* to engage in political dialogue? Is there a Jewish way to debate, to argue to protest? When we despair about “gridlock” in Washington, when on so many days the news tells us about a federal Congress that “can’t get anything done” or a State

Assembly that's "ramming legislation through," do our sages and teachers offer us guidance toward achieving productive dialogue and action?

One inclination may be simply to withdraw from political debate. If argument inevitably leads to demonization or dehumanization of one's opponents, then the better course might seem to be not to engage. Many religious traditions promote asceticism, withdrawal from the institutions and activities of the everyday world, to allow their adherents to focus on pure and direct forms of service and prayer.

Judaism, however, goes in the opposite direction: our tradition challenges us to embrace argument. Just as God in *B'reishit*, Genesis, creates the world and brings order out of chaos through words, so vibrant human words – debate and discussion – can serve as instruments of creation as well. As Rabbi Or Rose teaches, "When we disagree with one another, when we take sides, we create the necessary space for the emergence of new and unexpected ideas. Without *makhloket* [controversy]... the horizon of human discovery would be severely limited."

Indeed, the whole system of Jewish law depends upon the arguments and debates of scholars and rabbis through the centuries who have held opposing views. And polarization was certainly possible. After all, our ancestors believed that they were interpreting Divine will and intention, not merely hammering out a budget or an approach to one temporal concern or another. But our tradition emphasizes, too, that there are appropriate ways to argue and debate. We might look back two thousand years for instruction, to two rabbis who were perhaps the greatest debating partners in all of Jewish history: Hillel and Shammai. They and their disciples, known as *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai* – the "houses" of Hillel and Shammai -- engaged in the most intense of disputes. And yet these debates are regarded as exemplars of sacred activity -- *machloket l'shem shmayim* – controversy for the sake of heaven.

A rich Talmudic passage (Eruvin 13b) recounts:

For three years there was a dispute between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, the former asserting, the law is in agreement with our views, and the latter contending, the law is in agreement with our views.

Then a voice from heaven announced: "*Eilu v'eilu divre elohim hayim*, both these and those are the words of the living God... but the law is according to the House of Hillel."

The Talmud then asks the question that may be in your own mind as well: If both of the opinions are correct understandings of God's will, "words of the living God," why does the law side with Hillel and his students?

The answer: "...Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so humble as to mention the words of Beit Shammai before their own."

Rabbi Amy Eilberg writes, "... the law is according to the House of Hillel not because of their superior analysis, but based on the House of Hillel's tone and style of communication, their way of conducting themselves in the midst of conflict." Eilberg continues:

I don't believe that Hillel and his students all naturally defied the human tendency to escalate, polarize and dehumanize around conflict. Hillel must have taught his students that communicating respect to those on the other side of a dispute was more important than winning the argument. Relating to others with the kindness and honor due to every human being was more highly valued than being "right."

Thus, Hillel and Shammai stand as an ancient and eternal example of the possibility of engaging in vibrant, honest disagreement about highly important matters with those with whom we passionately disagree. The Talmud communicates on virtually every page that one can engage in passionate debate on important issues without violating the most basic Jewish values of human dignity, respect, and reverence for all of God's creatures.

Now, you might say, this is all very well when we're talking about Talmudic debate. Hillel and Shammai may have disagreed strongly about details, but they probably agreed on many fundamental aspects of Jewish faith and practice. How does Hillel's attitude translate to current politics?

Consider for a moment the recent actions of Republican State Senator Jeff Tarte. Senator Tarte gathered other Republican lawmakers and began meeting privately with a group of clergy who support the "Moral Monday" protests. He was upset, he said, by hearing accusations at the protests that "conservatives aren't listening and don't care." Tarte organized what he called the "Social Justice Conversation Group." One of the participants, GOP Representative Bill Brawley, characterized it as "a group interested in listening as much as talking." And Sen. Tarte noted, "There are solutions we can agree on, but you have to start a dialogue before you do that."

Even today, even in politics, treating those whose views differ from our own with respect is possible. But we have become accustomed to polarization, and an expectation of disrespect; so, sadly, when Senator Tarte acknowledged the group's existence in a press conference, the ministers felt they had been used for political advantage and broke off the talks. Building trust takes time, tolerance and mutual goodwill.

Apart from past experience and the expectations we generate from it, what makes listening to and talking with (and not merely talking at) those on the other side of political issues so difficult? In his recent book, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion, psychology professor Jonathan Haidt offers some answers.

Haidt's extensive research supports the idea that our initial response to questions of right and wrong comes from the gut – what Haidt calls moral intuition. Moral reasoning – arguments to support our intuition – come afterward. That is, rather than starting by working out a position rationally, we reach a conclusion first and buttress the conclusion with reasons later. When the conclusion precedes the argument in this way, it is quite difficult for argument – even rational, well-reasoned argument – to cause us to shift positions.

But if we are truly interested in learning to listen to and respect those whose political conclusions are different from our own, Professor Haidt offers a useful way to think. He likens the righteous mind to a tongue with 6 taste receptors: care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority and sanctity. In our environment, Haidt says, the political left and right share interest in the first three concerns -- care, fairness and liberty – but the left has stronger sensitivity to perceptions of oppression, and harm, while conservatives place greater emphasis on loyalty, authority and sanctity. Haidt argues that this is where the biggest divisions between left and right are found.

When contesting political issues, then, rather than arguing over which side is more moral – a concern likely to lead to polarization – a better approach would be to ask, “What moral concerns inform my position? And what are the moral concerns of my opponents?” This will not lead to instant answers – but asking the question this way may make it easier to listen to, and talk productively with, those whose policies we oppose.

If we grant that those whose politics differ from our own are not inherently evil – and that different moral issues might be at stake for different people – it is, nonetheless, critical for us to ask: Does Judaism place a higher value on some kinds of concerns than on others? To which moral issues should

we be most sensitive as Jews? How must our faith, our heritage and our history inform our response to the issues of the day?

Let us start with an essential Jewish text that can take us to unexpected places. The one I have in mind is the commandment that appears in Torah more often than any other. Guesses? [PAUSE] We might think it is to love God or love our neighbor to not have idols or maybe to keep the Sabbath. But no – the commandment is: not to oppress the stranger, because you were once strangers in Egypt. With variations, it appears no less than 36 times in our Torah.

This trope is etched in our consciousness as Jews. We become Jews because we were enslaved in Egypt and then rescued by God to enter into the mutual covenant of Torah. Being slaves is a cornerstone of our identity. We have a whole Passover Seder each year to encode this in our collective psyche. We know what it is like to be oppressed; therefore, we must never oppress others.

We draw from these texts and their variants in the Torah the lesson of empathy and compassion through shared experience. In recent history, this is perhaps most clearly evidenced in Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights struggle of the 60's. Here is an excerpt from Rabbi Joachim Prinz's speech at the 1963 March on Washington:

. . . From our Jewish historic experience of three and a half thousand years we say: Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom. During the Middle Ages my people lived for a thousand years in the ghettos of Europe. Our modern history begins with a proclamation of emancipation. It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is, above all and beyond all such sympathies and emotions, a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.

Our own community drew on the lesson of the Exodus in fighting for the citizens of Darfur. It has also been the basis for Kehillah's support of the building of the IFC's Community House to make sure our city has an adequate homeless shelter and transitional housing services. It undergirds our participation with Justice United in efforts for immigrant workers' rights. We strive to make sure that society's most vulnerable are protected because we know that the stranger, the powerless are the easiest to abuse. We were once they.

Our identification with those who suffer, and our resulting compassion, are inescapably part of what it means to be Jewish. But that doesn't go far enough. It is only half of the lesson.

Let's go back to the Torah text. Our redemption from bondage in Egypt does not begin with God's miraculous splitting of the Sea of Reeds, nor with the plagues, nor even with Moses and Aaron confronting Pharaoh. Rather, the process of liberation begins when God hears our cry. Here is Exodus 2:23-25:

And it came to pass in the course of those many days that the King of Egypt died; and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered God's covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the children of Israel, and God took cognizance of them.

Of course, God does not simply take a sit-and-wait approach to see if the situation corrects itself. Rather, in the next chapter, God calls out to Moses from the burning bush. God has heard the plight of the people in Egypt, and, mindful of their suffering, God will rescue the people and bring them to the Promised Land. (Exodus 3:7-8)

Now, in contrast, consider Pharaoh's response to the cry of the Israelites. During Moses's first audience with Pharaoh, Moses demands that Pharaoh let the people go. Instead, Pharaoh imposes harsher conditions on the Israelites, requiring that they gather their own straw with no decrease in brick production. The biblical author heightens this contrast between Pharaoh's response to Israelite suffering and God's by using the same root word for "cry" – "tzk'akah:"

Then the foremen of the Israelites came to Pharaoh and cried (*va'yitz'aku*): "Why do you deal thus with your servants?" ... Pharaoh said, "You are shirkers, shirkers! That is why you say 'Let us go and sacrifice to Adonay.' Be off now to your work!" (Exodus 5:15-18)

In his insightful book "Justice in the City," Rabbi Aryeh Cohen shows how these contrasting responses in Exodus put before us a stark choice: When we hear the cries of people suffering injustice, shall we emulate Pharaoh, who refused to listen? Or, will we seek to be like God, who hears the oppressed and then acts with saving power? Rabbi Cohen teaches that we must go farther than a shared sense of victimization or identification with the powerless. The question that the Exodus narrative puts before us is: Once you were powerless, but now you are free. Now you have power. How will you use it?

As Jews, we are obligated to hear the cry of the oppressed, and to act – to end injustice wherever it is found.

The mandate to hear and to respond echoes through the generations and finds even fuller expression in rabbinic law. Rabbi Cohen relates how the Talmud tells a story of the prophet Elijah, and of a seemingly righteous man with whom Elijah speaks regularly. However, when the man builds a gatehouse for his home, Elijah stops speaking with him. Why does Elijah cut off ties over the building of a gatehouse? The commentators ponder the question; Rashi, the most influential of all medieval commentators, concludes: “Because it gates off the poor people who are crying out – and their voices are not heard.”

But our obligation goes beyond a negative injunction not to shut ourselves off, and also beyond concern for only our immediate surroundings. Talmud teaches:

All who can protest against [something wrong that] one of their family [is doing] and do not protest, are accountable together with their family.[All who can protest against something wrong that] a citizen of their city [is doing and do not protest], are accountable together with all citizens of the city. [All who can protest against something wrong that is being done] in the whole world, is accountable together with all the citizens of the world.

So we learn from the example of Hillel that we can listen and debate respectfully with those we oppose; in this we are aided by Professor Haidt, who teaches us to recognize that different sides may focus on different moral values. But Torah, and a long, rich history of rabbinic interpretation, teach us which of those moral values must be primary for us: To be Jewish, to live a Jewish life, to strive for holiness – means to pay attention, to hear, and to act on behalf of the wronged, the powerless, the oppressed.

So when we hear that 500,000 people in North Carolina are being cut off from access to Medicaid, that an estimated 300,000 registered voters without photo I.D. will be stripped of their right to vote, and that 170,000 of our fellow citizens are losing extended unemployment benefits; when we read of the repeal of the Racial Justice Act, which allowed people on death row to argue that racial bias influenced their trials; when we learn about the funding cuts to public schools, guns allowed on our playgrounds, and the elimination of environmental regulations that protect our water supply – and the list goes on and on -- as Jews we are obligated to hear and to respond. We are obligated to fight, to act, to protest and to demand that the

vulnerable – the young, the elderly, the immigrant, the poor – that those who are the easiest to strip of rights and opportunities must be protected.

Torah requires us to remember that we were once slaves, and to know the heart of the stranger with compassion; beyond that, it calls us to recognize that now we are powerful – and that we must use our power in the service of justice and redemption.

The Jewish response to injustice is to stand with and fight for the vulnerable and disenfranchised. And so, as we argue with respect, let us nonetheless keep in mind what is at stake. We must gather our collective power to fight for the rights and freedoms of all of North Carolina's citizens.

May our efforts in the coming year, and years, help us to honor the divine in every human life – in those we oppose and those we stand with in protest. May our actions strengthen the fabric of our community and help us to live lives of holiness and blessing. May it be a good year, a year of transformation and renewal. May we all be blessed for life and peace. And we say: Amen.