

PASSIONATE, COMPASSIONATE DIALOGUE

ROSH HASHANAH 5764-2003

Shelly Lewis

The Shma Yisrael is the most famous line in Jewish tradition. If we are asked for a single sentence, which captures our essence, it is likely that the Shma would come to mind. Just recently Ted Kahn, one of our esteemed shofar blowers on Rosh Hashanah, deepened its richness. You see, he explained, even those with diametrically opposite views of God can say the Shma with a full heart. If one is an unquestioning believer, one can recite the Shma with its emphatic affirmation of One God. If one is not certain about the Divine Presence, one can say, also with a full heart: “Shma Yisrael, I don’t know Elokeynu, I don’t know Echad!” And if one is rather certain that God is not present, one can say: “Shma Yisrael, I deny Elokeynu, I deny Echad!” Standing together in a sanctuary packed with people, these variations would blend so perfectly, that we might not even know that the one sitting next to us holds a religious position quite apart from one’s own. And the sheer sound of our chanting aloud as one empowers us all.

I love this bit of self-deprecating humor because it touches on a great need at this hour. We are a passionate people. We hold a spectrum of views on many issues, most especially on those that face our people. It is that very character of our people that gives us color and gives us strength. It is that very character of our people that can do us in and truly tear our fabric of peoplehood. How we choose to handle our differences is of momentous importance. Today I want to hold up the way of passionate compassionate dialogue. I want to reflect on Israel and our response to Israel in crisis.

We all wished that we might enter these High Holy Days with a little more hope over Israel and the Middle East. It was not to be. Each day is a matter of life and death. And we fear that at any moment some terrible act of terror might shatter the calm of this season. We have lived that way for years now. How much more is it the case every day for our brothers and sisters in Israel. That grim reality is truly a sufficient source of discomfort. What I fear is that the way we often treat each other during this period adds another layer to our pain. And when the terror executed against our people is joined with vilification of each other with whom we disagree, the situation becomes intolerable.

I want to tell you two true stories where I was a personal witness to a bald attempt to marginalize and silence another with whom one disagrees. As a member of the Board of Rabbis of Northern California, we were lobbied very hard by leaders in our local community to exclude from our ranks a colleague who took a very left wing position on the settlements and the occupation. We received a demand that such a person had no legitimacy as a rabbi and should not be accorded a position of respect that membership in our body might provide.

Shortly thereafter, we had invited a guest to speak and teach in our congregation. His topic was to be: "Building a more compassionate world". He happened to live in a settlement in the West Bank not far from Jerusalem. I was astounded when I received a cascade of emails and faxes calling for us to cancel his appearance. After all, this man made his home in a place that was the "chief obstacle" to peace. So read the messages. How could a settler speak about "Building a more compassionate world."?

What I soon realized, and what is there for all of us to see, was this direction of delegitimizing and shouting down our own brethren who disagree with one's position. It was the same whether it came from the left or from the right or from some centrist place. It was not enough to make our own position clear. We would not be satisfied until we treated those who stood at other places as truly unworthy, disloyal, even among those who betray our people. The words used about the other and the vehemence expressed in the tone of voice could all be found in the thesaurus under the entry: "Sinat Chinam", causeless hatred.

Sitting around the table as a Board Of Rabbis were those who also disagreed strongly with our colleague, but we quickly came to a consensus that we would not silence each other nor make membership contingent on any particular position one would take. On the contrary we stand behind the right of each of us to speak out.

With regard to our speaker from Israel, his living in a settlement would never prevent him from teaching us Torah. In fact, I know him to be a person who has always devoted himself to inter-religious dialogue and as one who works for reconciliation with Palestinians even when it is very hard to do so. His detractors admitted they didn't even know him. Just his address alone was enough to deny him an audience.

These episodes are representative. And they form the text for still another chapter in perhaps the most harmful book ever written in our history: strife between brothers and sisters. Our sages tell us that many of the great tragedies in Jewish history were due to sinat chinam, causeless hatred among us. It's a curious phrase, causeless hatred. After all, their hatred did have a cause. In Roman times, Jews took up passionately differing

positions on how to respond to Roman oppression and the threat to the Temple in Jerusalem. The arguments were verbal. Then they became violent. So why should our sages label them as “causeless hatred”? Perhaps because the disagreements completely obscured the shared values, concerns, and world view which were concealed beneath the presenting divisions. There should not be hatred between brethren.

It is not hard to trace this motif into the modern era. We only have to recall the names of Emil Grunzweig and Yitchak Rabin to see how disagreement can truly lead to tragedy. And, to this day, arguments over how to respond to the crisis in the Middle East bring tensions, undo friendships, and sap the energy of a people in unnecessary ways.

I am afraid that has happened in our own congregation. To me it is so very important that we choose another way.

That other way is not difficult to locate. It is, in fact, a treasured part of our own tradition. We were a people born into argument. As the rabbis shaped Judaism, they somehow concluded that machalokot, differing views, were beneficial. More, they were to be cultivated, remembered, recited, and treasured. If the arguments were over practical issues of how to live in accordance with God’s will, then decisions were usually taken and a particular path chosen. Not all the time however. Some difficult decisions would be delayed until a time of greater wisdom. One day, Elijah would return and resolve all indeterminate matters. Meanwhile, whether a decision was taken or not, the details of the machloket , the arguments back and forth, positions stated that were ultimately rejected, even the names of those holding the minority view, were assiduously committed to memory. We know the names well of those who persistently argued: Hillel and Shamai, Akiva and Yishmael, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehudah, Rav and Shmuel, Rava

and Abaye among so many more. Virtually every page of Talmud preserves these arguments. To quote an argument without naming the source is still considered very bad form. Students of Talmud to this day spend as much time understanding the rejected view as that which became law. Nothing should be lost as if to say that these dialogues were precious in themselves. And maybe one day a minority view, remembered for millennia might guide a new generation in solving a new problem. The machloket became holy.

The sages even had a name for such disagreements: “Machloket l’shem shamayim”, an argument for the sake of Heaven. Who modeled such an argument? Hillel and Shammai, two noted first century teachers. They disagreed over hundreds of subjects from practical issues as how to properly place the mezzuzah on one’s doorpost or the order for lighting Chanukah candles to philosophical questions like: Would it have been better for God not to create the human species? Their disputes continued for years. Meanwhile they held on to their respective views with passion and practiced Judaism differently. Finally the Talmud in Eruvin records a voice from Heaven which declared:

oOhhj ohvkt hrcs uktu ukt

“Both these and those are the words of the Living God.”

What could they have heard in these dramatic words affirming the view of both sages? Perhaps they recognized that what Hillel and Shamai were trying to grasp was the most difficult of tasks: to attempt to formulate God’s will for them and their descendants. What could be more challenging than to try to capture God’s will, to bring the infinite Word into human speech. To reach so far, they knew they needed all the wisdom that was available from every source. If sages like Hillel and Shamai could grapple with one another, the approach to truth would stand a better chance. God’s Word was far too

elusive and complex to be grasped fully by any one very human teacher. If opposing views were to be shot down, the entire enterprise would be poorer.

The quotation affirming both teachers does continue:

קקקו ,הכף ופקוו

“But the halacha follows the position of the School Of Hillel”

Why was this so, seeing that positions of both teachers were equally praised? Because Hillel and his disciples were easy and forbearing, and they would study their opinion and the opinion of the School of Shamai. And not only that but they would mention the views of the School of Shamai before their own. While both sages were appreciated, the way that Hillel approached his interlocutor was the determining factor. He invariably treated Shamai with respect. He would put his opponent’s view in his own words, and he would review his position first before stating his own. It is rather stunning to think that so much of our practice to this day was decided by the way in which passionate arguments were conducted two millennia ago by one humble sage. The way he related to his peers was, apparently, as crucial as the substance of his arguments.

I find these ancient texts very compelling today. I find in them a pathway for us. The arguments gripping the Jewish world over Israel are once again very passionate. There is much at stake every day as the quest for a solution to the Arab-Israel conflict goes on. Precious lives are at risk. Solutions are elusive. Look where we are today after 55 years and more. We need the wisdom of everyone who cares. I believe we should not be dismissive of views that are unlike our own. This deadly conflict must be resolved. And, meanwhile, we must be on guard that we do not also sacrifice the vitality and spirit of Jewish peoplehood, the bonds that embrace us all no matter where we stand.

More specifically, this is my vision for our congregation as long as this crisis persists. I want each of us to be able to speak one's mind across a very wide spectrum and to be free to act on his or her convictions. I hope we can cultivate a climate of mutual respect, that we can hear one another, argue with one another, encourage one another, and each state each other's views with clarity and empathy. There is room for left, right, and center at Kol Emeth, and we need each of us to hold a vision that includes the other. We need those who speak out when Israel is vilified in the press or over the airwaves. We need to encourage those who engage in dialogue with Palestinians locally. We need those who will help us sort out truth from falsehood. We need people who believe in and lend support to co-existence projects, which do not give up on an embattled Middle East. We need people who will care enough to train our young students to stand up for Israel on campus. We need people who will teach those same young people to remain open to dialogue and to deeper understanding of the plight of the other. We need voices that point to all that is still remarkable about Israel even in the midst of combat. We need people who are courageous enough to discreetly raise questions about this or that particular policy or action in the State of Israel. Never, ever, in our tradition is there a time to keep silent when one is a witness to injustice. We need to honor those who urge us to buy Israel Bonds, shop Israel on line, reach out to the victims of terror like Emily Dubois' 1.5 million penny drive, and give to the many institutions in Israel that suffer during this time whether they be the King David String Ensemble, the Goldstein Youth Village, or Magen David Adom. We need to encourage those who go to Israel and who plan congregational visits so that we can demonstrate our support by our personal presence.

I wonder if you have had the same experience as I. I feel completely at home in an AIPAC meeting or at a gathering for Rabbis for Human Rights on whose Advisory Board I serve. I am stunned by the incitement against Israel and the murderous martyrs whose parents praise them. Yet I know Palestinians who want a just and secure peace and never give up, and I want to hear them and give them my support. I feel uplifted when hearing the narrative about Israel set straight and Israel defended against unfair critics. I feel crestfallen when confronted with the suffering of the Palestinians. From my own inner turmoil and personal attempt to sort out often-contradictory feelings, I conclude that we need many, simultaneous pathways pursued by those who care.

Is it too much to ask of each other to be involved fully in the way one has chosen and to stretch oneself to affirm others who follow another path? It is urgent that we live in a very broad tent in this unsettled time.

If one travels backward into the heart from any particular involvement with Israel within our congregation, one finally locates a shared passion; love and concern for the State of Israel. Were it not for that shared source deep within, none of us would be moved to bother. Can we not search for that common place in each other?

Today we have said the Shma together. Who can imagine the shades of belief or disbelief which lie behind the words spoken and harbored in the human heart? Yet we are able to join together as Yisrael and to give strength to one another. Our very differences are also our strength.