For Heaven's Sake: Fighting Fairly in a Fraught Time
Rosh Hashanah 5778

It's an iconic moment in one of the most memorable films. It's the scene in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, a split screen between dinner with, on the one side, Annie's family of whiter-than-white Yankee stock, and on the other, the Queen's cacophony of kvetchers that comprised dinner at Alvy's, aka Woody's. The Halls calmly consume a complimented ham, discussing swap meets and boat basins as Annie's grandmother, a "classic Jew-hater," makes Alvy feel like a chasid amongst Puritans. On the other side, Alvy's dinner table resounded with every kind of borching over brisket and selzer, inevitably debating who was sick, who was working, every point a source of contention and rebuke. Allen's artful genius brings the scene to a close as Annie's mother on one screen asks Alvy's father on the other what they were doing for the holidays. The father answers that they are fasting to atone for their sins. "What sins?" the mother continues. The father quips, "To tell you the truth, we don't know." Clearly, even God's will is open to debate.

While an obvious exaggeration that only a Jewish filmmaker could get away with, there is truth in even the most over-the-top portrayals. Who amongst us hasn't spent a Seder or Thanksgiving letting the vino flow to lull our rising wrath at the verbal excesses of a cousin who will be off the list next year?

It's no news to all of us here that we Jews like to argue. Debate, disputation, skepticism and questioning are deeply woven into our cultural

DNA. And it is a dynamic equally rooted in our faith and tradition, as discussions of Torah and text, even at high volumes, reveal to us nothing less than insight into God's vision for us.

But our current climate in America reflects something different. The extreme polarization of opinion, life experience and even consensual reality has left our nation unable to find common ground on most issues, let alone common cause for the common good. And the demonization of the Other, the assumption of worst intentions and inability to *even listen* to the Other, has riven our country in ways unprecedented since the late 60's, or perhaps the Civil War.

And perhaps most troubling: even our America Jewish community, well versed in intense but respectful argument, has fallen victim to this larger virus of vehemence and vituperation. Whether debating the current American administration, the right course for Mideast peace or the rise of white supremacists, we Jews have imbibed the division and disconnect afflicting our wider society.

***So how did we get here*? There's a growing genre of volumes, armies of highly paid speakers and endless cable punditry to diagnose our current diseased body politic. The symptoms range from a narrow diet of echo-chambered media, to paralyzing partisan politics, to our geographic encampments into urban islands amidst rural seas. But the bottom line is that we can't talk to one another because we don't listen to one another,**

and thus we can't relate to one another, or even recognize the humanity of the Other.

In his compelling book, The Righteous Mind, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt finds the source in our psyche, expressed in the metaphor of a rider and an elephant. The rider is our reason and the elephant our emotions. When confronted with an issue, our elephant of an emotional response kicks in immediately, deciding what we believe. Facts, logic and rationale, even the most cogent and convincing, only serves to support our immediate impulse of feeling. *The rider is literally going along for the ride*. And once that view is set, no facts, logic or rationale can dissuade us. Think climate change, or the economy, or voting against one's interests.

Dr. Haidt's prescription for what ails us counsels that attempts to persuade and inspire must focus on values and aspirations that unite us: safety, comfort, dignity and a sense of purpose.

***I know, I know…easier said than done*. But there is hope, there is possibility, and there is another way--something compelling that can, if truly embraced, span our seemingly yawning breach. Our people possess an insight, borne of our history and tradition, a process of healthy engagement with inevitable debate, conflict and disagreement. And if we can reclaim it for ourselves, we can offer potent remedy to salve this divided nation.**

It is a concept expressed in *Pirke Avot*, the pithy axioms of the rabbis. It teaches: *Every debate conducted for the sake of heaven shall*

***endure*. The Hebrew catch phrase for this is: *Machloket L'shem Shamayim*. So what is this purported panacea for our pugilistic era? It's as simple as it is curative: *Constructive Debate*.**

Now, to be clear, this is much more than the overwrought notion of "civil discourse." I was on a panel at a recent AIPAC convention with Israeli *New York Times* columnist Shmuel Rosner, and he quipped that Jews don't really do civil discourse. *And he's right—especially for Israelis*! It's not that there's not a time for civility in our conversations. It's that, as the Book of Ecclesiastes reminds us, "There is a time for everything under heaven…a time to be civil, and a time to really hash it out."

But Jewish constructive debate goes beyond our people's penchant for verbal and intellectual melees. It's a central value emerging from our struggles with Torah. The Talmud reads like a much longer, obsessive-compulsively detailed account of Woody Allen's dinner table. Debate wasn't to be avoided, but embraced as necessary, requiring a mastery of facts, powers of persuasion and creative approaches to ongoing challenges. A good quarrel over something that matters helps reach a synthesis of understanding that provides a glimpse at truth—a distillation of viewpoint that reveals the mind of God.

Now, this wasn't a license for knock down drag outs to no purpose. We are cautioned that the Second Temple was destroyed due to *sinat chinam*—baseless hatred. So there is a limit on how far we let an argument

go. But our tradition provides healthy guidelines that are as inspiring now as they have been for millennia.

We learn of two famous rabbinic adversaries and the schools they spawned: Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai. Hillel was a fairly mellow teacher with a tendency toward leniency, while Shammai was a stickler who did not suffer fools easily. And though they and their followers disagreed about nearly everything, they did so for the sake of heaven.

They also embraced a quality enshrined in the Torah portion for Yom Kippur afternoon: *Tochecha*—thoughtful rebuke—the integral human need to share concern, to challenge perceived error, and to diffuse resentment that grows like a cancer in the soul of the unexpressed. So next time your in-laws feel compelled to comment on some aspect of your home, parenting or marriage, remember, it's in the Torah.

So, back to what it means to debate "for the sake of heaven." Our tradition gleans 4 key elements that render a disagreement constructive:

***One: debate issues, not personalities*. Keep the focus on the stated position and not the person stating it. Like apocryphal tales of Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neal downing drinks in the Congressional watering hole after a day of partisan combat, the Schools of Hillel and Shammai ate in one another's homes and married off their children. It's not personal, it's business for Jews—the business of finding the best, most authentic solution.**

Two: What's your motivation? **No, this is not hackneyed advice for actors. It's a revealing question: Do you really want to solve the issue or do you simply want to win, or even worse, to turn the dispute into a quest for pride or honor? Focus on the prize, resolving the argument, and keep your individual needs and hang ups out of it.**

***Three: And this one really speaks to our moment: Listen to the other side*. Be open to learning something you didn't know, and admit when evidence, reason or logic supports the other side. Now, the rabbis didn't have to contend with rival news bubbles or even contested views on reality, but you get what I'm saying. And don't just *hear* another's view—don't just take a breath only to formulate your next soliloquy without really *listening* to your opponent. Take the time to pit their points against your own and be honest about what's more compelling.**

And finally: *we learn that both Hillel and Shammai "spoke the words of the living God."* In other words, there is validity, authenticity and real human need in another's position. I'm not talking about extreme views that deny human worth. But even a position we rail against righteously emerges from a real, impactful, genuine life experience in that person. If you can honor the source of another's views, who knows what shared truth might be revealed?

The tradition offers a compelling coda to the Hillel and Shammai debates. We learn that the views of Hillel were often decisive. Why? Because when Hillel discussed his disagreements, he presented both sides,

often sharing Shammai's side first. Humility in all things, but especially in how we inevitably and regularly disagree with one another, is the key to not only an enduring debate for the sake of heaven, but our people's ability to endure--*period*.

My recent experience traveling to Abu Dhabi was a laboratory for living out debates for the sake of heaven. The government of the United Arab Emirates, in partnership with global faith leaders, brought together 10 rabbis, imams and evangelical ministers to meet one another, share stories, consume many over-the-top meals, and forge a path forward between our sibling faiths whose wars of words and worse are often at the heart of global strife.

One of the chief conveners was Pastor Bob Roberts, a mega-church leader in Dallas, who laments how his fellows-in-faith have fomented so much of the Islamaphobia that pervades our culture. But he's doing something about it, at great personal cost in the contempt of his colleagues. *Where do the rabbis come in*? I'd like to think that the organizers knew that if the imams and the evangelical ministers could get along with rabbis, they could bond with anyone.

The gathering offered a very different approach to interfaith reconciliation. Rather than start with discussions of theology, and then move on to joint projects in the hopes of knowing one another better—a head, hand and heart approach—we were encouraged to do the *opposite*—to go from heart, to hand to head--to start by dining and socializing in one

another's homes, planning joint projects in our communities, and *only then* to begin discussing the issues that divide us. That process has already begun in our community, and look for more opportunities in the coming months to engage.

But we also need to implement a similar process as individuals, first in our Jewish community, and then moving outward to share our insights and achievements with a troubled, needy nation. Toward that end, I'd like to invite all of you to do something seemingly small but significant: *Invite someone you'd never imagine talking to for a cup of coffee*. Let's call it *Constructive Conflict over Coffee*—the 3C's—leveraging the Seattle magic of caffeinated contentment for a higher, nobler purpose. Reach out to that uncle who voted the wrong way in the last election; call that grandparent or grandchild who just doesn't seem to get it on Israel; message that former friend on Facebook whose endless diatribes put you on blood pressure medicine. I'm even providing some *yontiff* swag to help start the conversation.

But the challenge will be to get over that first hump of aversion, of recrimination, of bitterness. And then, *just talk to each other*—person to person—human to human—child of God to child of God. Don't worry, you should only do so well that you'll be able to process all of your bones of contention. Just remember to debone them constructively, for the sake of heaven, and remember that the person across the latte from you is *more a mirror than a target*.

There is an Islamic midrash—if I may—that tells the story of a famous character, Joha. A man comes to a river and sees Joha on the other side. The man calls out, "How do I get across the river?" Joha answers, "You are already across."

If we could just learn to see the view from the other side, the rest, while seemingly complicated and even frightening, might just fall into place. *Could it really be that simple*? We'll never know unless we try, one person to another. The need is great, the time is short, and the world is waiting. Amen.