

Can We Talk?

“I'd Like To Teach The World To Sing”

by the New Seekers

*I'd like to teach the world to sing
In perfect harmony
I'd like to hold it in my arms
And keep it company*

*I'd like to see the world for once
All standing hand in hand
And hear them echo through the hills
For peace throughout the land (That's the song I hear)*

Ah, for the heady late 1960's and early 70's, when a generation imagined they could change the world. In some ways they did. Of course, the backdrop for the 1971 song by the New Seekers was the Vietnam war, protests rallies and campus takeovers. The civil rights movement and the feminist revolution changed our society forever. The turbulence of the times also produced profound generational and ideological divides, which festered in an atmosphere of hostility between groups.

Here we are again, only this time it's worse. Our society is sharply divided by affinity groups who talk inside echo chambers, but rarely dare to engage in respectful conversations with the “other side” of their ideological category. We have lost the ability, courage, patience and wisdom to listen to each other when we disagree.

The two biggest issues on my mind that live in this divide are internal Jewish conversations about Israel and American political conversations. I am pained by the growing inability to dialogue on these issues and talk with those with whom we do not agree. I would love to stand here and tell you about my liberal Zionist ideals and my views on the prospects for peace. But I won't -- not today, on this holy day. And I'd relish a chance to share my views on this fall's upcoming elections. But I wouldn't dare. That's because we are community - we are a whole that could be fractured and even torn apart if I were to stand for one position and not another.

Still, I admit that I wish I could assert my views publicly on important controversial issues. But I find myself wondering about the source of that impulse. I worry about how our cultural turbulence is fed by an unhealthy diet of divisive “I AM RIGHT” discourse in the media, especially social media. The urge to prove that one point of view is correct, meaning that the other is NOT, has overtaken our ability to hold respectful disagreements.

The atonement I seek today, and I ask you to join me, is to notice either the impulse to be right or the impulse to reject another's view. On this Holy Day of Atonement, At-One-

ment, we have an opportunity to redirect our passions to living our values. Ultimately, it is not what you think, but how you live that defines who you are. We can't just say we would like to teach unity, harmony, and peace -- we must strive to live it. That means looking each other in the eye, respecting each other's uniqueness and difference, and listening actively with curiosity and compassion.

The field of Agile Software Development in which my husband Bob works includes a team exercise for individuals to notice what toxin blocks them from understanding, respecting and collaborating with others. Suppose you had to consider which of these four toxins are in play when you react to others' ideas with which you don't agree. Do you react sometimes with **defensiveness**, or **blaming**, or **stonewalling**, or **contempt**? Which of these might describe your default reaction? And then, what will you do to break down those walls?

You know the old joke, when you have two Jews, you have three opinions? Jewish tradition honors disputes, and models how they can be respectfully conducted. The Talmud shapes rabbinic Judaism, the civilization that we inherited. This massive 63 tractate record of rabbinic discourse on every imaginable topic in life, records a range of opinions, often diametrically opposed. It is a document in disagreements, which are often unresolved. Unresolved discussions are simply concluded with the rabbinic statement, "*makhloket hi/* it is a disagreement."

Our interpretive tradition, mining our ancient texts for meaning, presents a multitude of views on every verse of Torah and the Hebrew Bible. This creative process continues to this day. The Talmud is visually laid out to present a range of rabbinic views on every idea. In addition, each generation's scholars add their own commentary to the views of the past.

The Jewish religion has long resisted attempts to boil Jewish belief down to dogma. Maimonides' 13 principles of faith, written in the 12th century, is a singular example. By the way, those principles comprise the *Yigdal* song that we sing at the end of our holiday services. The rest of Judaism is lived. Even *halakhah*, Judaism's sacred path for living, continues to unfold in the interpretive process, an ongoing dialogue between generations and viewpoints.

The Talmud offers tremendous wisdom for cultivating dialogue with mutual respect, even when disagreement is heated and consequential. And when the rabbis sometimes slipped and got nasty with each other, they didn't hide the ugliness generated by their hostility. From this we learn the consequences of nasty, spiteful or cynical disagreements. We are human -- we don't always behave as our best selves. But if our intention is respectful, compassionate disagreement, we will hit the mark more often.

The classic Talmudic example of opposing views, akin to conservatives and liberals today, was the opposition of the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel. This 1st century duo disagreed about everything. We learn,

“Rabbi Abba said in the name of Samuel: for 3 years there was a dispute between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel, the one asserting, “The law is

according to our views’, and the other asserting ‘The law is according to our views.’ Then a divine voice went forth and said, “The utterances of the one and those of the other are both the words of the living God, but the law is according to the school of Hillel.”

Since both are the words of the living God, what entitled the school of Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and humble; they *taught their own rulings as well as those of the school of Shammai*. And even more, they taught the rulings of the school of Shammai before their own.

This should teach you that *he who humbles himself is exalted by the Holy One*, and he who exalts himself is humbled by the Holy One.” {BT Eruvin 13b}

How can we learn to stop that knee-jerk reaction opposing another person when they irritate us? A story from a modern day sage, the notorious **RBG** was published recently: **Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s Advice for Living** {by RUTH BADER GINSBURG} OCT. 1, 2016

Justice Ginsburg wrote, “[An] often-asked question...: “Do you have some good advice you might share with us?”... It comes from my savvy mother-in-law, ...on my wedding day. “*In every good marriage,*” she counseled, “*it helps sometimes to be a little deaf.*” I have followed that advice assiduously.”

Justice Ginsburg goes to say that she followed this advice through 56 years of marriage and in her work, including on the Supreme Court. Her advice: “When a *thoughtless or unkind word is spoken, best tune out. Reacting in anger or annoyance will not advance one’s ability to persuade.*”

Speaking about her experience on the Supreme Court, Justice Ginsburg reflects, “Despite our strong disagreements on cardinal issues... we *genuinely respect one another, even enjoy one another’s company*. Collegiality is crucial to the success of our mission. We could not do the job the Constitution assigns to us if we didn’t — to use one of Justice Antonin Scalia’s favorite expressions — ***‘get over it!’***”

When we interact with people with whom we disagree, even vehemently, with the starting point being respect, the outcome will be enjoyment of the relationships that can blossom.

One key to being able to shift our anxiety over listening to the opposing side begins with *managing the one-on-one interactions of everyday life with the confidence, courage and compassion of letting go of the small stuff*. When we hold onto the small hurts and the discomforts of everyday life, there is a cost to our souls. It is painful to live with anger, frustration and resentment.

In a NY Times column “***The Cost of Holding On,***” Carl Richards talks about “getting over it.” He comments, “The faster we learn to drop our emotional dead weight, the more room we create for something better. I’m talking about everything from stewing about the guy who cut you off in traffic this morning to still refusing to forgive an old

friend for an event 20 years ago. *My question for you is, “What’s one thing you can set down this week?”*

Think of a time when you have let go of your reaction, held back from saying the opinion or judgement that burst into your head when someone said something you found objectionable, or irritating, or even hurtful. Have you been there? What helped you to let go?

The tractate of the *Talmud, Mishnah Avot*, called the *Wisdom of the Fathers*, offers several reflections on ways to cultivate mutual respect.

“R. Eliezer said, Let the honor of your fellow be dear to you as your own.” {Avot 2:10}

Evidently, the sage Shammai had trouble upholding that honor. A famous story records,

“It happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, “Take me as a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the entire Torah, all of it, while I stand on one foot.” Shammai instantly drove him away with a builder’s measuring rod he happened to have in his hand. When the heathen came before Hillel, Hillel said to him, “**What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow person.** *This is the entire Torah, all of it; the rest is commentary. Go and study it.*” {BT Shabbat 31a}

It’s a whole lot easier to let go of our irritations and annoyances when we stop to *imagine being in the other’s shoes*.

Imagine: How would he feel if I said what I am thinking? Would I like it if she said *that* to me? Would I like it if someone accused me of being wrong? Is my reaction possibly arrogant? Is it a put-down? Will she hear “that’s dumb!” when I object to her view and react with my correction? Will my reaction create tension with him, and if it will, *is it worth it?*

“**What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow person.**” Hillel was revered because of his kindness -- even more than his opinions. How can I be like Hillel?

Another tool for curbing our reactions is to practice *sympathy*. That means disabling the switch in our heads that leads us to be reactive. Instead, we can learn to activate the *sympathy* switch. Consider the person whose comment or action sets you off. *Why does she feel that way?* What is his concern? *What is behind that view?* The sages taught,

“A man’s attitude toward his fellow people should always be sympathetic.” {BT Ketubot 17a}

Imagine if we all had to argue *the other side* of an issue on which we feel unbendingly committed to our view. One person at a time, one interaction at a time -- imagine the impact on public discourse if we could listen to each other’s differences without reactive response. It would be transformative and -- it is entirely possible.

It is not just listening that requires caution-- it is our *talking* too. We can soften the impact if we express our opinions as the product of our own experience, direct knowledge, or our *needs*. This begins with being honest with *ourselves*. *Why do I feel a need to say what is on the tip of my tongue?* This is how we can cultivate the wisdom to be present to another’s views.

Some of the hostility in discourse today comes from **fear**. Many of us fear consequences from the political challenges facing our world today. This reaction may not be from analytical thought, but from raw emotions, a worry that our world and our lives could be harmed. Some of the painful Talmudic stories of heated arguments that ended badly reveal the rabbis’ fears. In times of historic change, the path forward may be shrouded in fog. It’s a confusing time and we are worried.

Maybe the view of the speaker is coming from their fear. If we consider, before we react, “what is worrying them?” -- we can reach much greater sympathy and understanding. What if we tried to name our fears? What if we ask others what evokes worry for them?

Dialogue driven by fear and emotions are more likely to devolve into division and hostility. A story is told -- a warning to us:

“When the disciples of Shammai and Hillel who had not studied sufficiently grew numerous disputes multiplied in Israel, and the Torah became two Torahs.”
[BT Sanhedrin 88b]

The Talmud teaches that *the antidote to fear is study and prayer*. Soothe the heart with prayer, but *equip the head with knowledge*. *We have control over our own reactions*.

I have long mused over how James Carville and Mary Matlin do marriage, being on the opposite sides of the political spectrum, not just personally, but professionally. How do they do it? They have said that they don’t talk politics at home. Their marriage is about love and family.

If we set aside differences in the name of *sh’lom bayit* -- peace between us -- it may happen that some important issues remain unresolved. We can’t always keep peace by *avoidance*. We can seek resolution by remembering that “you don’t have to be wrong for me to be right.”¹ And, timing is everything. As Ecclesiastes, Kohelet said, “There is a time for every purpose under heaven.”

The sages taught,

¹ Rabbi Brad Hirschfield

“This is what the Holy One said to Israel: My children, what do I seek from you? I seek no more than that you love and honor one another.” {Tanna DeBei Eliyahu 26}

There is too much at stake to remain on this path of division. We need to be able to work together to resolve the challenges facing our world today. Our ancestors left us a legacy of respectful disagreement and mutuality of purpose. May this New Year give us insight and fortitude to live by their example and lead others on this path.

Just Delicate Needles

Rolf Jacobsen, trans. Robert Hedin

It's so delicate, the light.

*And there's so little of it. The dark
is huge.*

*Just delicate needles, the light,
in an endless night.*

*And it has such a long way to go
through such desolate space.*

So let's be gentle with it.

Cherish it.

So it will come again in the morning.

We hope.