

A Call for Humility and Love

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Should a rabbi, or should a rabbi not, speak about...fill in the blank - the elections, Israel, race in America, “that is the question.” So often, I lean towards “no” - First, because I am not a political pundit and second, because there must be some places and times in our lives that are saved from the toxicity of today’s political discourse. And yet, a Judaism that totally cocoons itself from the world is unworthy of our attention.

As a matter of principle, the Conservative movement takes seriously both fidelity to the tradition we have inherited from our ancestors and the necessity - in fact the desirability - for the world we live in to impact and change our practice of Judaism. For example, as American and western society more fully recognized women’s equality in the public sphere, the liturgy of the Conservative movement began to reflect that change by including the foremothers – Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah – in our prayers as a reflection of the significance of women’s roles in Judaism. The mention of our foremothers makes visible the presence of women as part of our historical covenant with God. For Conservative Judaism, our participation in the world is not a weakness but a blessing.

Judaism must not only evolve by incorporating moral progress, but must also speak to the world in which we live. Of all days on the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is a day when we turn outward, when we celebrate the birthday of the world, when we remind ourselves of one of Judaism’s most important messages: Adonai our God is not god of a particular place nor just the god of Israel, but God is One, Creator of the World.

To believe God is the Creator of the world is to inherit an obligation beyond ourselves, beyond our own tribe, to care for the world we’ve been given. And yet, I am not a prophet. I do not believe myself to have some special insight into the newspapers that you do not. What to say?

What I’d like to ask, beg, for this Rosh Hashanah in myself and in others is: humility in our public discourse, specifically about Israel. When engaged in conversations about things as weighty and complex as the issues that confront America and Israel and the world, the more someone tells me that they have all the answers, the less I trust them. For me, the conversation must begin and continue with a deep sense of: I might be wrong. I don’t know.

In the book of Ezekiel (29:3), we read: Thus said the Lord God: “I am going to deal with you, O Pharaoh king of Egypt, Mighty monster, sprawling in its channels, who said, ‘My Nile is my own; I made it for myself.’”

Pharaoh’s deep character flaw is a belief that he created the Nile, that he created the world that surrounds him. The Midrash says you can also read that last phrase as, “I created myself,” I am responsible for myself and all that surrounds me.

Today we affirm: God created the world. My friend and teacher, Rabbi Shai Held, Rosh Yeshiva of Mechon Hadar in NY teaches that the human correlate of affirming that God created the world is: I did NOT create the world. No human being has all the answers.

It is a painful irony that the pages of Israeli newspapers are far more tolerant of deep disagreement than the discourse of our own Jewish community. Good people can - and should - ask pointed questions. Judaism has long trusted that wisdom comes from mahloket / shakla v'tarya - the back and forth question and answer between people who hold two conflicting ideas in their hands at once. When we engage in those conversations we should hold in one hand the conviction: "I am right," and in the other, "tell me why I am wrong!"

Baba Mezia 84a

After Resh Laqish died, Rabbi Yohanan grieved for him greatly. The rabbis said, "What can we do to restore his peace of mind? Let us get R. Eleazar b. Pedat and place him before him [R. Yohanan], for his traditions are ready." The brought him and seated him before him. For every issue that R. Yohanan mentioned he said, "There is a teaching that supports you." He [R. Yohanan] said to him, "Do I need this? When I made a statement, the son of Laqish would object with twenty-four objections and I would solve them with twenty-four solutions, and thus our traditions expanded. But you say, 'There is a teaching that supports you.' Do I not know that my statements are accurate?" He tore his clothes and went crying at the gates, "Where are you, son of Laqish?" He could not be consoled.

Rabbi Yochanan yearned for someone to challenge, not confirm his own views! He longed for someone to raise objections, and from that process - the Torah grew. Wisdom comes into the world when people are humble and say, "tell me how I might be wrong."

Here in our own community, when my friend, and colleague, Rabbi Eric Solomon proposed a trip that included a visit to Yasser Arafat's grave on the itinerary. I want you to know that there were good people who wrote and met with him privately and with the respect befitting a teacher and leader of Torah in our community. They urged him to reconsider and asked him to explain his thinking. Reasonable people can and did ask about what is to be gained by standing before Arafat's grave. In the end, Rabbi Solomon decided to cancel the trip. I want to share with you part of what he wrote to his congregation:

"While my intentions were pure, my heart broke as I listened to the pain my actions had caused some congregants. I listened carefully to this feedback and discussed what I heard with Rabbi Jenny and synagogue leaders. After deep reflection and soul-searching, I have decided to cancel the trip. To anyone who feels confused, hurt or upset on account of my actions, I sincerely apologize and ask your forgiveness...."

I deeply love Beth Meyer and what we, as a family, have built these past 11+ years. And I want to emphasize that my love embraces each and every one of you, regardless of where you land on the spiritual, social or political spectra. I am touched that so many congregants pleaded with me to move forward as planned, but I cannot - and will not - do anything that jeopardizes the integrity of the Beth Meyer family.”

I know Rabbi Solomon and his convictions. I know canceling was deeply painful. I publicly commend him - first, second and third for his love - of the Jewish people, of Israel, and for his community. We need more such love to be put front and center.

Friends - Israel used to be something that united the Jewish community. I fear it threatens to tear us apart. None of us has all the answers. In what we do, and what we say, I pray we can express ourselves with love for one another, and with humility.

Let me end with a story shared with me by my colleague, Rabbi Jack Reimer.

When the Baal Shem Tov - the founder of Hasidism - was young, he was bored in class. The study of the Talmud, with all its legal fine points, did not attract him. Sometimes he spent the hours of class staring out the window, entranced by one beautiful rosebush that grew just outside his classroom. He was fascinated by the beauty of this rose, and he felt that this rose embodied all the holiness in the world. Even though the Ethics of the Fathers clearly states that one who breaks his learning to stare at nature risks his spiritual life, nevertheless, the Baal Shem was entranced by that rose bush and could not take his eyes off it. And so he was thrown out of school that day.

What did he do? He ran off into the forest. And when he got there, he went from one tree to the next, hugging each one, and contemplating the wonders of creation that it revealed.

And then, something wondrous occurred. He felt a hand on his shoulder, and so he turned around, and there was a kindly old man standing there. The Baal Shem had no idea who this man was, even though he lived in a small town, and thought that he knew everyone who lived there. This man he had never seen before. The old man patted Rabbi Yisrael Shem Tov gently on the shoulder, and said to him: “May I give you a blessing?”

The Baal Shem said: “Of course”. The old man put his hands over the eyes of the child, and said to him: “May you always have ‘heilege oigen”. May you always have holy eyes. And then he disappeared.

Who was that man? We do not know. It may have been Elijah the prophet. It may have been a messenger of God. We don't know. But we do know that the Baal Shem said that this was the greatest blessing that he ever received.

Can we look at each other, can we look at Israel with holy eyes? I want you to know I was given a gift. I had been to Israel more than fifteen times since I first went there in 1993, but I'd never taken a group from my synagogue. It had really been a long time since I'd led a group filled with people most of whom had never been there before. They were able to see it with holy eyes. The nature. The people. My friend, Babi, who tirelessly does security for 19 different communities along the Lebanon border. To swim in the waters of Sachne. To cry as we arrived to Jerusalem. And we did not paper things over. Rabbi Solomon and I shared a vigorous debate on the way up to Jerusalem about the challenges that Israel faces and the dilemmas that it puts to us. But I was given the gift of seeing Israel again with holy eyes. Not only tsuris, not only issues, but people and history and love and richness.

I pray we can see that in each other when we have these conversations. I pray we can This new year—for you, for me, and for all those whom we love, may we be able to look at Israel with holy eyes. I pray we can struggle together with love about how we can help Israel to protect herself and best embody Jewish ethical imperatives to lift up Jew and Palestinian alike.

And this year, may we too see each other with holy eyes. Beth El is holy not because this room or even the ark or the eternal light: what makes a synagogue a holy place is that people gather here to pray and to be with each other. This place is holy because it is an assembly of holy people, who have come here to reach out to God in prayer and to be with each other in community. We can only know that community if we speak and act with humility, that none of us has all the answers, that God's image is present in each and every person, and in Israel as well. May we be blessed to see with holy eyes. Kein Yehi Ratzon. May it be so. Amen.