

Regaining the Jewish Middle

Do you know why Jews attach the mezuzah on an angle at the front door of their house?

It's actually that way to remind us of the greatest story of compromise our tradition has ever told. The story goes back to the 1st century. The scholars in the school of Hillel believed the mezuzah should be affixed upright to the doorpost, reflecting the truth that a person should always stand before God. The scholars in the School of Shammai believed the mezuzah should be affixed horizontally, symbolizing the truth that we should always be prostrate before God. In spite of these truths, the two sides found a compromise. The decision to put mezuzot on an angle on our doorposts is the daily reminder to us of the virtue of compromise, a virtue to take with us as we go out into the world, and as we come home to our families.

It's a quaint story if we think of it as moral lesson. It's an important story if we replace the powerful parties- the schools of Shammai and

Hillel-- with today's powerful parties: the Democrats and Republicans, or the Likud party and Blue-and-White party, or mtbw Secular Jews and Religious Jews, Liberal Jews and Orthodox Jews. Then it becomes a powerful reminder of the need for compromise if we all want to live under the same roof. The lesson of compromise is an indictment against the moral certainty that leads to intransigence and disfunction. stalemate.

And it is a powerfully important story when we consider that in all ages, the political center is flanked by extreme views, also within the fold. During the time of Hillel and Shammai, the Sadducees and Pharisees were bitter rivaling parties, fighting for political standing with Rome. But the political mix also included the Zealots, who concealed weapons under their cloaks and were so extreme in their moral outrage against compromise with the Romans rulers that they knifed their opponents. Their inability to join with other Jews and to compromise with Rome led to the Jewish-Roman War, which culminated in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the fall of the Jewish government, the slaughter of countless Jews by Rome and subsequent dispersal of Jews to every corner of the world, for the next

2,000 years. We have known extremists in Judaism's political and religious world over the past two millennia, and their presence always weakens the community.

I share these stories of compromise and extremism, because we may be at one of those watershed moments when it is imperative for the Jewish community to stand under one tent, lift our eyes from our personal and political agendas, and learn to compromise for the sake of the entire people of Israel. We see an Israeli electorate that is deadlocked over the power of the ultra-orthodox and secular Israelis, as they wrestle with laws impacting the democratic and Jewish nature of Israel. We see an American Jewish community that is deadlocked on whether support for Israel means supporting or rejecting Netanyahu, and that is overwhelmed by the growth of anti-Semitism on the hard right, and anti-Jewish factions on the political left whose anti-Israel rants continue to paint a one-sided simplified narrative of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And we see Jews in both countries either horrified, or supportive over heads of government who regularly employ racist language, and fear mongering, play to right-wing religious bases, and whose legal and

moral behaviors are under investigation. And while American Jews and Israeli Jews have sat in the hot seat many times before, extremists on both sides are pulling the fabric in ways we have not experienced before.

But the righteous indignation that fuels the left and right wings of politics, and fuels us as individuals, allows only anger to spew forth, never compromise. Compromise is hard, because it means moving past our moral views which certainly reflect our deepest personal values. We need only look at the intractability of American and Israeli discourse to see this. Lost are the values of listening or seeking to understand. And quite frankly, Judaism has more than enough texts warning about what happens to those who are righteously indignant. Whether they are wrong-hearted opportunists like Korach, whose rebellious party is swallowed by the earth or as righteous as a Shimon bar Yochai who is so focused on God that his gaze scorches the earth before him, the cost is great, and often with unexpected consequences. We cannot afford the path of righteous indignation.

Our moral sensibilities, our righteous anger, is often driven by our sense of the truth. We live in a time where the very word truth has

become subjective, where we have to fight the use of disinformation as a political ploy. While we have every right to be upset over the current assault on truth and the manipulation of facts, we must also be aware that none of us has a monopoly on any one truth. God, we are told in a Midrash to the Psalms, gives Moses 49 reasons why a matter should be decided in one way, and then 49 reasons why Moses should decide the matter in the opposite way. While any single interpretation might have many good supporting arguments, so does the exact opposite interpretation. We must seek to listen to and understand the arguments on every side of the issues that face us, which is a challenge to ourselves to seek out facts from outside our comfort zone. The phrases that fill our sacred texts ...Zeh v'Zeh-- these and these are the words of the Living God-- Gam zeh- this too, dvar achar- another way of understanding this matter... these are to teach us to think with openness, consider other perspectives, turn the matter over and over.... We will not move forward if we are a closeminded people. In our progressivism, we may be close minded. In our conservatism, we may be close-minded. If our value system keeps out others if they disagree with us, then our values are not

as ethical as we claim. Do not be so openminded that your brains fall out, we are taught. But we should not hold a moral arrogance that our way is the only way to understand a situation. And if we can give up the extremes of seeing every issue through the moral lens of our rightness- then we can take our place in the middle- and actually engage in discourse and understanding, and productive work to remedy society's many ills.

This middle is- in fact- the only reasonable place for Jews to be. Jewish scholar Yehuda Kurtzer, of the Hartman Institute writes of this in an article in the Forward, entitled: "The Biggest Threat to the Jews? The Partisan Divide." He writes, "I believe we are at a critical juncture for a new American Jewish conversation that asks us to consider how our political choices as Jews are implicating our collective identity... the cost of toxic partisanship- a social ill that Jews are complicit in promoting—is taxing Jewishness and Jewish communal life... American Jews are replacing most of our other ideological commitments with partisan politics as the primary instrument of our ethnic and religious

identities as Jews. In this climate of partisanship, the morality of being right has effectively replaced the morality of being kind.”

If you turn away from these words and think, I cannot abide the beliefs of others, you will be turning the wrong way. The goal isn't to turn away from each other in our differences, it is to hold our differences, learn from each other, and remember we are equal shareholders in Judaism's future, just as surely as we are equal shareholders in America's future.

Finding our way back to the center is vital for Americans now, and specifically for us, as American Jews. Whether we hold center left or right politics, or extreme right or left politics, our posture is wearing thin a fabric that cannot afford to be torn. Even as we worry about the weakening of democratic institutions in America and Israel, we risk fraying the Jewish community at a time when truly what binds us must be stronger than what separates us. We are all concerned with anti-Semitism at home and around the world. We are all concerned with authoritarian behaviors and policies in America, in Israel, in European and South American countries. We are all concerned with corrupt

leaders. We are worried about the forces of political unrest and climate change that will exacerbate global migration, because every time the Jew becomes settled, political unrest unmoors us back into migrancy. We are worried about racist tropes both emanating from Jews or aimed at Jews. Jews have always been involved with politics- it is our means of engaging with society and improving our communities. It is a mandate that is as old as the entire book of Deuteronomy, as forceful as the prophetic voice of Isaiah, and as necessary as the poetry of Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty. But we are called not to pursue any one political party's agenda, we are here to pursue the Jewish people's agenda of justice, compassion, and coexistence. You are already a registered member of the Jewish party. That is the center from which we can speak out about behaviors and words that are wrong, regardless of the political party of the one who speaks them. All of us are equally called to respond to Ilhan Omar's comments that "it's all about the Benjamins" as we are to call out President Trump when he uses code words like "disloyalty" about American Jews, speaks of globalism at the U.N., or gives lukewarm scripted responses to racial and anti-Semitic

violence. We can support PM Netanyahu's politics if we choose, and still speak out against his support of the ultra-nationalist, far-right racist Kahanist party. (Otzmi Yehudit). There is a place for truth, for speaking truth to power, for letting our moral imperative guide us. We can't live in the camp of righteous indignation 24/7, or we will never heal the ills of this world. It is the position we need to take judiciously, and thoughtfully, while we tackle real issues by listening and compromise.

One of the most famous Talmudic stories of rabbinic debate is a cautionary tale of what is really at stake when the ability to compromise is subsumed by our need to prevail. Rabbi Eliezer wholeheartedly believed that the oven of Achnai was pure. It had been taken apart, cleaned, and rebuilt. His colleagues in the House of Study did not accept his explanations. Eliezer, sure of himself, cries out, "If the law follows my opinion, let that carob tree prove it." The tree outside uprooted itself and moved quite a distance. The rabbis do not accept his proof. Eliezer calls upon the river outside to attest to his interpretation- and the river's current changes direction and flows upstream. Again, the rabbis are unmoved. Eliezer calls on the walls of the Bet Midrash to prove he is

right. The walls of the study house start to collapse in, only stopping when the revered Rabbi Yehoshua intervenes. Finally, Eliezer calls on God to testify that Eliezer is right about whether the oven is pure. A voice from heaven calls out- the halacha, the law, is according to R. Eliezer. In now famous words, Rabbi Yehoshua responds: “lo b’shamim he- this is not a matter for heaven.” Rabbi Eliezer, a brilliant legal mind, is chastised; for the sake of ego, Eliezer was willing to uproot tradition, symbolized by the tree, create conflict with the majority, symbolized in the unnatural turn of the river, and bring down the very institutions that are the foundation of the community, symbolized by the study house walls- all for the sake of being right. Eliezer destroys relationships, and the peace of the community, not to mention has the chutzpah to transcend the sacred boundary between humanity and God, all for a ruling about an oven.

From Hillel and Shammai and the mezuzah we learn to compromise. But the golden days of their thriving Jewish community eventually came to an end. Three generations later, under great political turmoil in the year 66 CE a heated debate broke out between Bet Hillel

and Bet Shammai. For months they had been arguing about how open or closed their community ought to be to non-Jewish neighbors. Bet Hillel argued for relatively open borders. Bet Shammai disagreed and argued that they build a wall to separate Judea from its neighbors. The two sides met to break the gridlock. Armed guards were placed at the doors, with instructions to let no one leave. The meeting grew so heated that full-on fighting began. Punches were thrown. Weapons were drawn. And it is said that many from Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai were killed.

It is folly to think that our words and actions can't do irreparable harm to our people. Political institutions can be overthrown. Four years after Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai came to blows, the Temple was destroyed, and the Jewish people exiled from their country. The rabbis of later generations wrote, the Romans may have destroyed the Temple, but it was *sinat chinam*, the hatred that had festered among the people, that allowed those outside forces to conquer their Golden Land and lose all that they had achieved. This is a loss we cannot afford. This is the time to move from our need for moral rightness to a middle ground where all can thrive. Gut yuntif ###