



Rosh Hashanah II Sermon – 5777 Debate

By Rabbi Pivo

At the High Holidays the mahzor emphasizes that we don't have limitless time to change for the better. There are limits to life, as there are for opportunities to heal our relationships and develop the habits that will enable us to be our best selves. This has been a year of debates about policing and racial bias, immigration and security, economics...and beauty pageants. All this arguing reminds me of a favorite comedy sketch in which a man goes to the local 'argument clinic.' This is where one goes, of course, to have either a five minute or a full half hour argument. And what does one argue about there? Why, what does it mean to argue, of course, and whether we are actually arguing or not! My sons and I have particular fondness for this skit, and I have instructed them that if at any time they need to establish whether I am still able to understand and communicate, they are to enter the room say the words 'Is this the right place for an argument?' to which I am to respond 'I've told you once.'

This is also the year, of course, of elections, which are a kind of national argument about the direction the country should go in the coming years. Just as important as the outcome of the elections, though, is the path we take to get there. Politics can be a nasty business, and we have come to expect a certain level of rough language and tactics in political campaigns. What is worrisome, from a Jewish point of view, is the degree to which debate about policy, law and competing visions of the country should go has lacked the thoughtfulness and civility those arguments so desperately require. We have spent entirely too much time arguing about arguing – or rather, doing everything possible to avoid a substantive argument, rather than really debating issues. If we are to make important decisions about who our leaders will be, we need to hear their views, in some detail, as well as some elevating discourse to convince us of their views. Getting from candidate to elected official should involve us all into debates – arguments – that inform us and that hold up all candidates as worthy of our attention not least because they treat their opponents with basic respect. We should argue about these things, but we must do so properly.

There are a number of well-known rabbinic anecdotes about the care and dignity with which we are to treat people with whom we disagree. A favorite of mine comes from the Talmud, which records the story of two of the greatest sages of their generation, Rabbi Yohanan and his brother-in-law Reish Lakish. As it happens, Reish Lakish had a sordid past: as a younger man he had entertained the masses in the Roman circuses as a gladiator, killing animals for public entertainment. In time he abandoned that life for one centered on Torah study, becoming a great sage and the primary philosophical opponent of Rabbi Yohanan. The two of them argued fiercely over many matters of Jewish law and, on one occasion during an argument over the kashrut of a certain knife, Rabbi Yohanan slighted his brother-in-law, in essence yielding to him by referring to his past career in the gladiatorial ring by saying 'Well, you would know about these things.' Reish Lakish died of shame from those words, and Rabbi Yohanan spiraled into

depression over his feelings of guilt. When the other sages sent a colleague to comfort him, saying 'I have a hundred proofs for every one of your utterances,' Rabbi Yohanan cried out for his brother-in-law, 'Where is Reish Lakish?' which is to say, where is the trusted friend who will tell me when I am wrong?

Too often we seek comfort in the opinions of those who agree with us, and avoid, or even disparage, those who disagree. We are often so convinced of our own rightness that we cannot admit even the possibility that we are wrong or that we are not seeing the whole picture. And as we see too often in public debate, those who disagree often sink into personal attacks, character assassination and rumor-mongering in order to undermine their opponents.

One of the practical outcomes of this presidential election will be the nomination of a new Supreme Court justice to fill the seat of the late justice Antonin Scalia. A striking fact about Justice Scalia's time on the bench is that despite holding the exact opposite legal opinions of some of his colleagues, he was extraordinarily close friends with them. It is well documented that he and justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg spent holidays with each other's families and often attended the opera together. These two legal giants could not have been more unlike each other in legal approach or in findings of law, yet theirs was one of the court's great friendships. And lest we exclude members of the court from our discussion of civility in debate because they are not, after all, elected by the public, let's go further back, to the 1980s: For those of us old enough to remember the names of Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neil, the President and speaker of the house at the time, who were, similarly, at opposite ends of the political spectrum. There are numerous accounts that 'after hours' Reagan and O'Neil enjoyed many hours together sharing drinks, jokes and stories from their shared Irish background. So we see from that it is not only possible to like those with whom we disagree; there is evidence enough in these two cases to suggest that democracy functions better when ideological opponents remain friends after work.

Rabbinic culture, which is to say Jewish culture, prizes argumentation. We insist that the path toward truth can be found only by listening to opposing views, taking their concerns into account, and letting the best argument win the day. As the tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Lakish illustrates, innuendo about intellectual opponents is not only inappropriate, it is harmful and shameful. There is a simple test in rabbinic culture for whether a particular disagreement is deemed worthy of our attention: Is it *l'sheim shamayim*, for the sake of heaven, or not? Are the different points of view being argued in order to arrive at the most just solution? Will the back and forth between the disputants be marked by attention to detail, by adherence to facts, and with concern for process and the dignity of all concerned? Regardless of the actual result of the argument, will it be one that will be accepted by all as a just outcome? That is indeed how I judge any particular synagogue meeting when a contentious issue is at stake. I am perfectly happy when two or more views conflict with one another, as long as each argues for an important value: financial responsibility; investment in our facility, staff or programming; growing our membership. I will happily listen to such arguments, even at great length, as long as they continue to focus on finding the best path forward for the institution and the community as a whole. In almost every situation, I am less concerned about the specifics of the outcome than I am with how we got there. Did we conduct ourselves with honor? Did we make our points without rancor? Can we come away from a decision feeling that each of us was heard and acknowledged as helping to achieve the goal, even in opposition?

These ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur are about self-reflection and transformation. Judaism insists that every human being has the capacity to change and improve, if we are willing to be honest about where we need to make those changes. One place where we have certainly not been at our best is in our role as citizens. It is our job to insist that our candidates tell us how they intend to run the place if elected, and to defend those plans against opponents with differing views. I don't think it will be controversial to say that we have not been privy to that sort of presidential campaign, and to the extent that we get the candidates we deserve, we have certainly fallen short this year.

What the story about Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Lakish teaches us is that we rely on those who disagree with us to poke holes in our assumptions, to sharpen our own point of view and, when appropriate, to convince us of something that we hadn't considered before. As Jews we insist on civility and respect for opposing views, because we affirm the humanity and the dignity of those who hold them. We won't agree about everything, but the one thing we must all agree about is to hold others in the same respect that we expect from them. It is an approach that affirms that at the bottom of every argument is not only the passion to fight for what we believe in, but also the assumption that every human being is created in the image of God. Judaism teaches us to love one another as we would love ourselves, which means to assume the best of, and to expect the best from, others and from ourselves. We will all be able to accept the outcome of any particular debate, argument or election as long as we feel that our voices have been heard, that the disputants have shown themselves to be people of integrity and that the process itself has lifted us up. In the ancient rabbinic tractate Pirkei Avot we learn that before deciding a case, a judge should consider both parties as liable, in order to give each a fair hearing, and after the decision consider both parties as innocent, as they have both accepted the court's ruling. As we begin a new Jewish year, and look ahead to the elections, we must rededicate ourselves to hold our candidates, and ourselves, to a standard that reflects those same values.

Shanah tovah u'metukah, a good and sweet new year to all.