

I have a confession to make.

I love Facebook. I do. I love how easy it is to share pictures of my kids with their grandparents. I love how I am able to stay passively connected with friends from previous chapters of my life; and if I need to, get in touch so easily with someone I haven't seen or spoken to in ten years. I love how Mark Zuckerberg and his algorithm have got me so well figured out that he delivers the news stories I want read and see without me having to go looking for them. Whether is the latest update on the Cubs game, an article about a new piece of technology that will soon be released, or a piece of political or social commentary from one of my favorite writers, I can count on Facebook and the hive-mind of my friends to deliver it at the simple push of a button—or in 2016 speak, with a fingerprint-recognizing thumb press.

Facebook, along with its partner in crime Google, has made it incredibly easy for us to find most of the information we are looking for without looking very hard. But the flip side to that is that it has also made it very easy for us to avoid any information we don't want to find. I don't just mean that now everyone puts "SPOILER ALERT" at the top of anything written about the latest episode of *Game of Thrones*; although my friends on the West Coast do appreciate that. No, what I mean is that Facebook brings us the stories we want from the sources we want with the slant that we want, and pretty

effectively shields us from whatever we don't want to hear. Newspapers, television, and the rest of the media world have in many ways followed suit. Whether you are someone who watches CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, Bloomberg, Al Jazeera or ESPN, you have made that choice in part because you know that the news and commentary your network will bring you will serve to reinforce your view of the world. That's why we watch: we see and hear smart people who agree with us telling us why what we are thinking is right, and how the people who disagree with us are wrong. And who doesn't like to be told that you are right, and that other guy is wrong?

The problem is that while that may be good for each of our individual psyches, it's not good for our county or our community. The lament of the "echo chamber" that social media, and to an ever-increasing degree the legacy media as well, is that we no longer have to engage with, listen to, debate, discern, or even tolerate those ideas, those positions, or those people with whom we disagree. All we have to do is turn them off and tune them out, and our individual worlds are nicely streamlined to tell us all the wonderful things about our own ideas and beliefs. What we are left with are segments of our society that cannot speak to each other, cannot hear each other, cannot communicate with each other, because we have diverged and retreated into cocoons of our own reason and perspective.

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And that's a pretty good description of our civil discourse today. Those of us who watched the debates last Monday night saw an exchange between candidates, but one could reasonably wonder whether the candidates were even trying to listen to each other. So much of our discourse these days, even when opponents appear together, feel like pre-packaged soundbites, and not the work of two intellects hearing, processing, and reacting to the words of the other. The morning after the debate, one news outlet ran a headline wondering whether Mr. Trump and Secretary Clinton were even talking about the same country! That's how bad it has gotten.

When Republicans and Democrats, independents and undecideds talk past each other and preach only to their bases, we are all left the worse for it. But it hasn't always been this way. When Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas barnstormed across Illinois debating the merits of slavery in 1858, they disagreed- vehemently. But by engaging in meaningful debate they sought to understand what their opponent was saying, if for no other reason than preparing themselves to respond. They stood in the public squares of towns up and down Illinois, seeking to deepen and widen their constituents' understanding of one of the most challenging political issues of this nation's history. They did it as a service to the community and to help the voters make a meaningful choice. They did it to make themselves wiser and to make this nation better. And after

losing that debate, Lincoln had the entire transcript published, that the words he and his opponent shared might be used to better our nation.

The notion that we can learn from someone with whom we disagree goes back much farther than the 19th Century Midwest. In the book of Proverbs we read: “*Barzel b’barzel yachad; v’ish yachad p’nai reheihu*. Iron sharpens iron, and a person is sharpened by his or her fellow.”¹ Thousands of years ago, the wisdom of our tradition understood that the act of disagreeing has an impact on us. It can cause us to recoil, to turn away, to want to hide from discomfort it might cause. But as it so often does, the tradition exhorts us to overcome our natural instincts and challenge ourselves to seek the higher and the better. Let us grind against each other when we disagree, the tradition says. When we rattle our sabers in public discourse, let them crash and clash, let them sharpen each other as we sharpen our minds. Do not turn away from an opposing idea in fear that it will make you question your own beliefs; challenge yourself with the wisdom of others, that you might deepen your understanding of your own belief, that you might become wiser and a better advocate of your beliefs, or maybe, heaven forbid, be convinced to change your mind!

¹ Proverbs 27:17

Generations later, the early rabbis reiterated our charge to engage with those around us. The great Hillel taught us: “*Al Tifrosh min hatzibur*; do not separate yourself from your community.”² For him, the teaching was an encouragement to stick closely with fellow Jews in the tumultuous world of the Roman empire. For generations, his words have guided our people to be sure they were part of a local community, that they had a synagogue and had neighbors who could help them, and instructed us not to distance ourselves, to remain connected to those around us.

We live in the age of connectedness. I can be reached on my cell phone 11 different ways: you can call me, text me, email one of two addresses, or use Facebook, Skype, GroupMe, WhatsApp, Google Hangouts, or FaceTime. Our kids have Snapchat and Instagram, now Google has introduced Google Duo, and there are whatever other apps we’ve not yet learned about. With our devices it is nearly impossible to separate ourselves from our community, unless we physically disconnect from them.

But we can pick and choose what part of our community we attach ourselves too. We have the tools to control most of what our ears hear and our eyes read. But for those voices we do not wish to hear we have technologies for that to: caller ID, send to voicemail, do not disturb; we can unfollow, unlike, or block. With a few clicks, we can

² Mishnah Avot 2:5

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build for ourselves islands of agreement, walling ourselves off from those opinions with which we disagree. We can swipe past those news sites that friends have shared that we know will just get our blood boiling; it seems in the moment like the easy and right thing to do. Why get myself all worked up by reading something I know I am going to disagree with? Millions and millions of people agree with me, so I must be right, and they must be wrong...

Al tifrosh min hatzibur. Do not separate yourself from your community. It's funny to think that in a world with so much connectivity we could be isolating ourselves, but in creating that cocoon of agreement by limiting ourselves to our preferred topics, facts, and opinions, that is exactly what we are doing. We are isolating ourselves from our neighbors and friends, from family, and fellow Americans by dismissing out of hand the possibility that they might have something to teach us.

For generations our people have celebrated divergence of opinion. The central text of the rabbinic tradition, the Talmud, is essentially that. The rabbis debating, arguing, wondering, challenging, edited in such a way that not only do contemporary voices interact, but the opinions of rabbis who lived generations apart appear in conversation with one another. It certainly is complicated, but it is also a thing of beauty. It teaches us that disagreement is a sharpening stone to our own reasoning, and that the best results

come out of people using the best of their intellect and their wisdom to challenge each other to better themselves and their community. And it teaches us to open our ears and minds to those with whom we disagree. Two thousand years ago, Hillel and Shammai were two of our people's greatest minds. Their arguments, recorded in the Talmud, are legendary. After one such disagreement, which lasted for three years, a voice rang down from the heavens, declaring "*Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayim*: These and these are the words of the living God."³ What does that mean? It means that both Hillel and Shammai's wisdom was divinely inspired, and even though they disagreed, they were both right. But, when deciding on the halakhah, on whose position should guide the behavior of the Jewish people, it is Hillel who we are told to follow. Why? Because Hillel and his students were the humbler of the two, and they would incorporate the thoughts and reasoning of Shammai and his students in their own opinions. Hillel and his students listened, they processed, they deepened their wisdom by dialoging with those who disagreed with them. And they were praised and favored for it.

That was 2000 years ago. But the benefits of interacting with our ideological opponents are just as meaningful today. Just last week, on Selichot, our guest Anthony David shared with us his insight into two groups whose relationship is among the most volatile

³ Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b.

on earth: Israelis and Palestinians. One insightful observation he shared with us was an assessment of what the wall, the security barrier, erected by Israel in response to the Second Intifada, has meant for this the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. On the one hand, there is no question that the presence of the barrier helped to quell the fires of the Second Intifada, making it measurably more difficult for suicide bombers from the West Bank to make their way into the cities and towns of Israel; an unqualified good. At the same time, the relationship between the Jews of Israel and the Arabs of the West Bank has been frozen in place. Why? Because the two communities are no longer mixing with each other, no longer interacting with each other. Before the Second Intifada, Jews of Israel could and would travel freely into the West Bank for all kinds of reasons; they would go for hummus in Abu Gosh, or to have their car repaired in Jericho. Palestinians would come into Israel every day for work, earning a living working alongside Israelis. They would get glimpses into each other's realities, and from time to time even sit down over a tea or a coffee and have a conversation about each other's lives. But the Intifada, and Israel's need to protect herself and her citizens from those who want nothing but death and destruction had a collateral victim as well: the intercourse and interplay between Israel's Jews and the West Bank's Arabs. While there is ongoing progress between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, the Jews of Israel and the Palestinians of the West Bank are foreign to each other, effectively squelching the

opportunity, and for many the desire, to start talks toward a peace agreement. By turning away from dialogue, the system of progress broke down.

Back here in the States, as we lament the gridlock that exists in Washington, there is one area, dear to many of us, in which we do see regular and productive bi-partisan success: support for the State of Israel. In the past few years, while attending the American Jewish Committee's Global Forum, I have heard from members of congress on both sides of the aisle share how powerful the experience of travelling with their colleagues from across the aisle on a trip to Israel can be in getting to know one another personally. They first learned about each other, then learned how to listen to each other and work together. We are seeing this trickle down to the state and local level, with a wave of anti-BDS legislation, mayors and governors of both parties expressing their commitment to keeping the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions away from our city halls and statehouses.

But as pleasing as it is to know that our modern country supports our ancient homeland, our country can and ought to be doing more to support itself. We have serious issues in our society. Both parties agree on the need for comprehensive immigration reform, but can't get together on what it should look like. We are experiencing a crisis of confidence in our country's commitment to racial equality. Our economy is growing,

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but not quickly enough to make up for the losses of the Great Recession. Our health care system, despite the expansion of coverage that the Affordable Care Act brought, does not work well enough for many Americans.

In just a few short weeks, we will head to the polls and cast our votes for the next iteration of our nation's leaders. We have a divided electorate, full of passionate, well-meaning Americans who hope that our nation's future will be bright. But come what may on November 8, there is going to be a November 9, and a January 20, and a March and a September, and four or more years of the next administration. As a nation, as a community, we are better when we work together. Our government is more effective in meeting our needs and our nation is stronger, when We The People hear and and listen to each other, letting our divergent ideas inform our leadership.

So in this new year 5777, throughout the rest of the election season, and as we move into a new administration, let us resolve to heed the words of the Shema, to listen. As a sounding of the shofar fills our ears with its joyful notes, may it open our ears to the words of each other.