

ENGAGING THE “OTHER” SIDE OF THE AISLE Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769

Four Jewish men, lifelong friends, are sitting in a restaurant. For a long time, nobody says a word. Finally, one man groans, “Oy.” “Oy, vey!” says the second man. “Nu?” asks the third. At this the fourth man gets up from his chair and yells, “Listen, if you guys don’t stop talking politics, I’m leaving!”

He wasn’t the first to steer clear of potentially inflammatory discussion. When it comes to political conflict, many of us have avoided this conversational “third rail” at cocktail parties, water coolers, and family meal tables. We certainly have plenty of opinions of our own, fueled by round-the-clock media coverage. Why, then, do so many Americans shy away from sharing our political thoughts with others?

Well, it turns out that we don’t. University of Pennsylvania professor¹, Diana Mutz, researched the frequency of political discussions in twelve different nations. Americans ranked in the upper half of these countries in the regularity of our talks about candidates and issues. However, professor Mutz also discovered that Americans are the least likely to discuss political matters with someone who holds a different view than our own. In fact, only 23% of Americans have regular discussions with people who disagree with them politically.² Translation: “If we don’t see eye to eye, then let’s just go our separate ways.

And that is precisely what has happened in the United States. We have gone in radically different directions, not just ideologically but geographically. Journalist, Bill Bishop, and sociologist, Robert Cushing, recently co-authored a book entitled, “The Big Sort.” In this fascinating work, they analyze the moving patterns of Americans over the past several decades and correlate those with political, theological, and philosophical shifts during that time period. What they discovered is both absorbing and alarming.

In the 1950’s, our American ideal was still the achievement of a great melting pot founded in the promise that we could all get along. Neighbors regularly got together with one another in civic and religious organizations, meeting places for people with a variety of viewpoints. This ideal of finding common ground was reflected politically in moderate parties³ that worked together during “the most bi-partisan period in the history of the modern Congress.”⁴ If you have read a newspaper in the past 10 years, then you know that we’re not in that period anymore. If you’ve turned on a television in the past ten days, then you know that it now often takes a crisis in our nation to see cooperation across party divides. And if you were watching the news before your family dinner

¹ (Mutz is a political science professor.)

² Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³ “Studies in the 1950’s consistently found that only one third of voters could differentiate between the two [major political] parties on the most contentious issues of the day.” (*The Big Sort*, p. 82)

⁴ (during the period from 1948 through the mid 1960’s) David W. Brady, Hahrie Han, and Doug McAdam, “Party Polarization in the Post WWII Era: A Two Period Electoral Interpretation” (paper prepared for the Midwest Political Science Association, April 2003).

tonight, then you know that middle ground is not easily found, even when calamity is upon us. So what's changed over the last half century?

Many of the citizens of the 1950's had experienced, first hand, the impact of The Great Depression. Their primary focus was achieving the first level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs...providing the basic human necessities for themselves and their families. By and large, those Americans not only achieved their goals, but by the 1960's had created a new generation who grew up without the same financial concerns their parents had faced as children. In the early 1970's, Professor Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan found a common pattern occurring among industrialized nations... "when people grew up in relative abundance, their social values – what they wanted out of life – changed."⁵ A generation who knew firsthand the realities of joblessness and depression placed a high value on economic growth. The next generation who knew prosperity, by comparison, prioritized self expression and individual choice. Over time, they chose to depart from Rotary and Elks clubs and to gravitate towards groups of like minded people. They also chose to buttress their self expression by moving into communities of others with similar lifestyles and beliefs. It is this migration towards homogeneity which underlies our red states and blue states, our red towns and blue cities, our red neighborhoods and blue streets.

We like to blame the politicians for this polarization. "Those folks in Washington are so extreme, that the American people are pulled towards the ends of the spectrum as well." It is true that our politicians are much more divided than they were even 30 years ago. In the mid 1970's 37% of the House of Representatives was made up of moderates. By 2005, that number had fallen to 8%⁶, a year which *Congressional Quarterly* called the most partisan year in Congress in the last half century. Yet that deep division seems more likely to be a reflection of our changing community composition than of scheming party leaders.

To share but two, of many, examples from Bishop and Cushing's research, "between 1995 and 2000, 79% of the people who moved out of Republican counties settled in counties that would vote Republican in 2004." And lest you think this self sorting has party allegiances, in the 1976 presidential race, 44% of San Francisco's population voted Republican. That percentage dropped every four years until 2004 when just 15 percent of San Franciscans supported George W. Bush. "The number of voters in San Francisco County hadn't changed since 1948. [That city] was transformed because Democrats sorted themselves in and Republicans sorted themselves out."⁷ Don't be fooled by the old aphorism that "opposites attract." In this case, it's just not true.

As a nation, we have found comfort in fortresses of the like-minded. We tend to watch the television networks which support our views, read the papers and magazines which

⁵ The Big Sort, p. 84

⁶ Alan Abramowitz, "Redistricting, Competition, and the Rise of Polarization in the U.S. House of Representatives" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 3, 2006).

⁷ The Big Sort, p. 44

support our views, frequent the websites and blogs which support our views, and now we even surround ourselves with neighbors who are more likely to echo our own thoughts. Is it any wonder that we often hear people say, “How in the world are the polls so close? I don’t know anyone voting for that guy.” That’s right. And just miles away there is another community having the same discussion about the other candidate.

In presidential election years past I might have been compelled to wonder which candidate is “good for the Jews.” That is no longer my primary concern. This year, I am forced to consider whether or not our current electoral reality is “good Jewishly.” I do not believe that it is.

In the Book of Exodus, God outlines the construction of the *Mishkan*, the portable wilderness sanctuary, in explicit detail. God instructs: The *menorah* [at the front of the tent] should be hammered of pure gold. Its base, its spine, the oil cups, and its ornamentation shall all be made from one piece of gold.⁸ Seven separate branches, with three pointed to the left, and three to the right, are all unified at their core. Divergent vessels of light all crafted from a single source, variant beams which all reflect the Oneness of God. This is the ideal put forth by our tradition...that we be ever cognizant of the singular foundation upon which we all stand even while we emit discrete and intense light in opposing directions.

But that has not been our American way of late. The homogeneity of our daily lives breeds the polarization reflected in our political system. When we hear our own opinions repeated back to us over and over and over again, we often come to the conclusion that there is no other legitimate way to think about the issues of the day, no common base upon which we stand. Bishop and Cushing discovered that “to be a member of a party [now means] agreeing up and down the line on a grocery list of issues. Politics ha[s] become so tribal that people [are] changing their minds about fundamental issues in order to conform to what it mean[s] to be a Republican or a Democrat.”⁹

This is why moderate campaigns which appeal to the middle have largely been abandoned in favor of platforms which play to ideological extremes. We want to hear what we want to hear, and for many, anything contrary becomes anathema. This is illustrated by neurobiologist and novelist, Robert Burton, who recently told this modern American tale of blind obstinacy: “Last week,” he writes, “I jokingly asked a health club acquaintance whether he would change his mind about his choice for president if presented with sufficient facts that contradicted his present beliefs. He responded with utter confidence. ‘Absolutely not,’ he said. ‘No new facts will change my mind because I know that [my] facts are correct.’”¹⁰ Double Oy.

“The Talmud tells a [very different] story of Rabbi Yochanan, whose study partner, Reish Lakish, had died. To comfort Rabbi Yochanan, his students found a brilliant new study partner for him. Several weeks later his students were surprised that their rabbi was more

⁸ Exodus 25:31

⁹ [The Big Sort](#), p. 242

¹⁰ “My Candidate, Myself,” by Robert Burton (Salon.com, September 22, 2008)

depressed than ever. ‘Rabbi, why are you so sad?’ they asked. Rabbi Yochanan replied, ‘My new study partner is a great scholar. In fact, he is so brilliant that he can come up with two dozen reasons why my views are correct. But Reish Lakish used to find two dozen ways to prove that my thinking was wrong. That’s what I miss! The goal of studying Torah with others is not to be proved right but rather to learn more.’”¹¹ Is that not the ultimate purpose of our political debates as well? To gain greater understanding about the truths of our world and to shape legislation and policy that will improve our society based on those realities?

The closest our tradition ever came to a two-party system were the ancient Rabbinic disciples of Shammai who could almost never agree with the students of Rabbi Hillel. Vociferous debate was a matter of course between these two schools of thought. And yet, how did later generations of sages reflect upon those disagreements? The Talmud recounts this narrative: “For three years there was a dispute between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel, the former asserting, ‘The law is in agreement with our views,’ and the latter contending, ‘The law is in agreement with our views.’ Then a heavenly voice came forth from on high and declared, ‘*Eilu v’Eilu divrei Elohim Chayyim hen...* These people’s opinions and these people’s opinions are both the words of the Living God.’”¹² There is intrinsic value in the opinions expressed on both sides of these contentious debates. Of course, we know that Hillel was ultimately the victor in these confrontations because it is impossible to find a single Shammai House on college campuses throughout North America.

Our Talmud text continues: “If both sides represent the words of the Living God’ what was it that entitled the School of Hillel to have the law written in agreement with their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest. They studied their own rulings and those of the School of Shammai. Those from Hillel’s school were even so [humble] as to teach the opinions of Shammai before their own.” Can you imagine such a debate today? “Before I offer my answer to that question on foreign policy, Jim, allow me to carefully explain my opponent’s position and how she arrived at her well thought out conclusions.” Jewish law sides with the opinions of Hillel’s disciples because they showed true deference and respect to those who differed with their own understandings. The Talmud also recounts that “...[in stark contrast,] the School of Shammai [would say ‘no’ just because the disciples of Hillel said, ‘yes.’]”¹³ The present day American political landscape is much more a reflection of this misguided practice... “If they say ‘no,’ then we say ‘yes!’ ‘If they proclaim that this need be, then we declare that it must not!’ We’ve seen where this worldview gets us. Inflammatory punditry. Deadlock. Stalemate.

Please do not misunderstand. Taking impassioned stances on issues is very much a Jewish value. As a people we have always cared deeply, and spoken forcefully, about a wide range of concerns from children’s education, to economic justice, from equal civil

¹¹ *Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 84a* – as summarized in *Count Me In: Jewish Wisdom in Action* by Gila Gevirtz (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 2005).

¹² *Talmud Bavli, Eiruvim 13b*

¹³ *Ibid.*

rights under the law to the sustainability of our natural environment, to name but a few. When we hold heartfelt and fervent positions, grounded in moral resolve and practical understanding of our world, then we ought raise our voices and let our thoughts be heard. So too ought we listen closely to the voices that ring out from the members of other tribes.

Our Rabbis called a conscientious and respectful debate between two such passionate people a *machloket l'shem shamayim* – a disagreement for the sake of heaven, an argument whose ultimate goal is to repair and improve our tattered world. There is not just one right response to poverty, nor only a single solution for hunger, illness, or injustice. Our tradition assumes that we will ultimately arrive at the best possible solution only if we begin with different opinions around the table. This is why we study Torah with a *chevruta*, a study partner who will hear our words and to whom we can fully listen, with patience and a desire for greater understanding. In Jewish tradition, two separate minds are assumed better than one.

In 5769, why don't we model what we seek in our political leaders? In Gandhi's words, "We should be the change we want to see in the world." Let's each find ourselves a *chevruta* this year – a sacred learning partner like Reish Lakish who can tell us why we're wrong at least as often as they assent to our point of view. Understanding the importance of bringing multiple perspectives to the table, when we enter the voting booths on November 4th, let's seek out candidates who seem likely to do the same. In the year to come, when we write and call our legislators concerning issues about which we are passionate, let's also share points on which we see room for negotiation, deliberation, and compromise. We need not naively pretend that we can all just get along. But at the same time, let us recognize that the deep divisiveness in our nation is damaging, not only to our political process, but to our hearts and minds as well.

Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas wrote extensively on the "other," that which is so far removed from ourselves that we can not even begin to comprehend its existence. For many in our nation, those of different political stripes have become this "other." For Levinas, however, engagement with such a foreign entity was the root of all ethical behavior. We have a moral obligation, he teaches, to see ourselves and others more clearly, to rise above our micro-targeted demographic profiles and bear witness to the lives of fellow citizens...fellow human beings. In so doing, perhaps, we can forge a new beacon of light in our nation, a multi-branched *menorah* that radiates from both the right and the left, and serves to illuminate its single golden source of support, freedom, and justice for all. The alternative is darkness, and of that option we can only say, "Oy vey!"

I conclude with words of prayer from a contemporary *siddur*¹⁴, a blessing for us all as we enter a new year: "O, God, keep me from seeing only black-and-white in a world of many colors. Do not let me imagine that my people are 'Children of Light' while others are 'Children of Darkness.' Teach me to see myself in every face, to hear the human spirit in every voice. Keep me from making distinctions that are of no significance, from judgments that serve only myself, and from the urge to rise by my neighbor's fall. From

¹⁴ *Siddur Lev Chadash*, used in the United Kingdom by Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues

prejudice preserve me, from hatred redeem me, and from self righteous [blindness]
defend me.” *Shema Koleinu* – Please God, hear our prayer. Amen.