Just before pesach, the first passover where family would be together in the same room, around the same table, not on zoom, without a mute button, my inbox was full with guides on “how to avoid political arguments at your family seder”. Because in some ways this night really isn’t all that different from any other night when family and friends gather together.

The strategies for Seder read like I imagine the contingency plans for D-Day or the moon landing.

1. Talk to key players beforehand.
2. Have conversation starters and activities at the ready.
3. If you're hosting, seat people strategically.
4. Have a designated room for political talk.
5. Don't engage.
6. Have an exit plan for sticky one-on-one conversations.
7. Prepare for the inevitable

My favourite…

8. If the table gets fired up, propose a toast.

We’ve all sat at that seder, we’ve all been there when that nutty uncle or that aunt with no social filter starts telling you how you’re wrong about everything you’ve said or believe. Blames you, your generation, your choices for the crumbling of the social order.

It usually begins with, “Well in my day…” or “What’s wrong with you liberals/conservatives is…” It usually starts with something like that and ends with shouting, hurried exits, proclamations never to return again and slamming doors.

Its at THAT point that you propose a toast - L’chaim!! And silently wonder if this is why the rabbis ordained we should drink four cups of wine.

Seriously, over the last few years it feels like we have lost the ability to speak to each other, to understand each other, to listen to each other and most importantly to tolerate differences. Of opinion, lifestyle, identity, orientation, race, religion all the boxes we put each other in.

It’s not just that we disagree, but that we are so disagreeable with those we disagree with.

It reads like the ashamnu prayer. We have been hostile, combative, vicious, spiteful, angry, hateful.

For all of these sins O God, stop surrounding us with people that tell me it’s black when I know that it’s white.

I feel it in myself, you’ve told me you feel it too. It’s not us, it’s them, those people who seem so detached from reality, who deny my right to my own opinion.

I hear people say things like:

“You voted for THAT person?! How could you, their policies are an affront to everything I believe, who I am. They’re the enemy, if you support them the You’re the enemy.”

“Do you realize how offensive what you just said/posted is to me? The fact that you believe it, that you won’t apologize for it and see how wrong you are that’s too much for me to take. Not only did you hurt my feelings but I think your ideas are dangerous and you shouldn’t be allowed to teach/work/play/join/belong here.”

Since when did having a difference of opinion make you the enemy?

I’ll tell you when, in 2012.

In 2012 social media, which at the time was essentially Facebook and Twitter, introduced the LIKE BUTTON and the RETWEET BUTTON. What they soon discovered, and what algorithms running behind those buttons amplified is that extreme and outrageous statements, conspiracy theories, absolutisms, long held hatreds and troupes; praying on our fears and insecurities get more likes, clicks and retweets, go viral, get more eyeballs on TV screens, more vocal and energized attendees at political rallies than pictures of your dinner last night or your hot take on ????.

It’s not just social media, though it’s a huge part of why our civil society has become so uncivil. There are a whole bunch of contributing factors like 24 hour cable news, smartphones in every hand, and more media and entertainment options than society could ever consume together.

Combined they broke a model of how we value and evaluate knowledge and truth that had existed for generations, going all the way back to the times of the Talmud if not before.

You have heard of the famous rabbis Hillel and Shammai, you remember them from the passover haggadah. They weren’t just rabbis they were leaders of schools, of academics with hundreds, maybe thousands of students.

Those thousands of students in the School of Hillel almost never agreed with the thousands of students in the School of Shammai. In fact they were often as different in opinion as left and right, red and blue, liberal and conservative are today.

The split between them was so deep that, according to the Talmud, "the Torah (Jewish law) became like two Torahs".[1]

But they were fundamentally different from today's political/social divides in one very important way. In fact it's the reason why we even know their names and their various opinions to this day.

[1] Tosefta Hagigah 2:9; Sanhedrin 88b; Sotah 47b

The Schools of Hillel and Shammai engaged in thousands of debates over every aspect of Jewish law. Not simply seemingly frivolous subjects like the acceptable mix of wool and linen in a garment or how much bread constitutes a meal and thus requires you to say a particular blessing. No, they engaged in many of the same socially explosive debates that we have today.

- When does life begin?
- What is our responsibility for the poor and the unhoused?
- How should we care for the earth?
- What is the role and authority of government?

But two things stand out about these diametrically opposing schools of thought.

FIRST: The Talmud records that even though they vehemently disagreed with each other on matters of Jewish law and custom, the students of Beit Shammai and the students of Beit Hillel ate in each other's homes and married each other's children.

Can you imagine that happening amongst those people whose opinions are so offensive to you that you have lost them as friends over these past few years?

Secondly, when it came down to determining who was right on any particular subject matter we learn that the law would generally follow Beit Hillel, not because they were more lenient (which they generally were), but because the students of Beit Hillel would begin their argument by teaching both their own position and those of Beit Shammai, in fact they would teach the opinion of Beit Shammai first.

The students of Hillel and Shammai engaged in debate to seek truth, now we engage in debate to seek destruction, because it's easier and thus more quickly rewarding.

For the last 10 years we have been tearing down our leaders, our institutions, our academics, our shared stories and histories, quite literally our statues and monuments to build ourselves up. We feel better when we point out what's wrong, what we disagree with rather than finding what is right and constructive.

I have come to think that the times we live in are like the end of the story of the Tower of Babel. When God seeing that human beings were building a tower to heaven rather than making heaven on earth, proclaimed:

“Behold, they are one people, they all speak the same language; and this is what they choose to do; [what a waste!] Let us go down and confuse their speech, so that they will not understand each other.”

As social psychologist Jonathan Haidt points out, “We are living in the days after Babel, we are disoriented, unable to speak the same language, share the same stories or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past. There is no truth and there are no facts.”

“Babel is not a story about tribalism; it’s a story about the fragmentation of everything. It’s about the shattering of all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community. It’s a metaphor for what is happening not only between left and right, but within the left and within the right, as well as within universities, companies, professional associations, museums, congregations and even families.”

Human beings were not designed to seek truth, we are designed to seek community, and by community that often means conformity; the path of least resistance and highest acceptance. We will compromise truth to fit in.

But… When your politics becomes your religion, changing your mind becomes heresy.

We are so attached to our point of view, incentivized not only by our number of likes, and followers, but more so by the fact that in such a polarized society if you get kicked out of your group for not towing the party-line you have no place else to go. There is no middle ground, only extremes.

Racial Justice activists won’t sit with Pro-Israel Racial Justice activists because of the intersectionality of their fight for Palistinian human rights.

Political Conservatives won’t sit with…

WORKING OUTLINE

1. The Jewish system of inquiry and truth seeking
    1. Hillel & Shamai - studying the other’s opinions, teaching them
        1. Sotah 7:12 “make yourself a heart of many chambers”
            1. Pure and impure
    2. Rabbi Yohanan & Reish Leikish - being rebutted by Reish Leikish was good for me and it broadend my understanding…
        1. There is a story in the Talmud about the passionate and often heated debates between Rabbi Yohanan and his brother-in-law Reish Lakish. It was during one of their passionate and sharp-tongued debates that Yohanan upset Reish Lakish for the last time. The mind of R. Yohanan was hurt and Reish Lakish was hurt. Before they could make up, Reish Lakish dies. R. Yohanan is inconsolable at the loss of his study partner. His students decide

to send him a new study partner, R. Elazar. On every word that R. Yohanan said, R. Elazar agreed with him. R. Yohanan lashes out at him, "You are no Reish Lakish! Lakish would respond to me with twenty-four difficulties to each word I said, to which I would give twenty-four answers, which produced a fuller comprehension of the law. But you say, 'There is a teaching that supports you.' Do I not know that what I say is right?" Thus he went and ripped his garments and wept. He said, "Where are you, son of Lakisha? Where are you, son of Lakisha?" And he cried tears until his mind slipped [from him] and he died.

2. The Jewish tradition of engaging with so many texts, which are contradictory, has created a Jewish way of thinking that is perfectly suited to our present time.

3. Intentionally reading the stuff you don't agree with
4. Ben Zoma - who is wise, he who learns from all me
    1. Written here on my tallit
5. You don't understand anything til you get people to criticize it and understand it.
    1. John Stuart Mill "In all of the great political and social struggles of our time each side is correct in what they assert but wrong in what they deny, if each could be made to recognize the claims of the other their will be little left to have a complete picture."

2. How do we fix this?
    1. The importance of us living together, singing together, coming together physically, moving together in time this is how humans bind themselves together - synagogue community
        1. What brings a society coherence is social capital, our relationships with each other, institutions and shared stories (that is what a synagogue is) - join a synagogue, any synagogue, it will save your life, it will save your children and grandchildren's lives, it will save our society, it will save the world. All of which is wiped out today.
            1. Build up institutions of authority, (universities, courts, houses of worship) when they disagreed they still realized they have to live together, "so the law followed Hillel…"
            2. Institutions are the bedrock of democratic success. They will always have corruption, and social media has exposed that even more. But many institutions are brilliant because they are setup to pit people against each other in "Managed Conflict" (Jonathan Rauch). But now all of a sudden there were some students where if you said one word that offended it became a speech crime. The intelligent institution is setup for debate. But now with social media we instituted a fear of each other.
    2. Be conscious of what game you're playing?
        1. Do you want to change their minds, defeat them, show off how smart you are, learn
            1. Those goals are incompatible and foolish
                1. You will be angry all the time

        2. Not have any positive impact on the world
    2. You'd be much better off asking question to try to draw them out and be curious because it turns out each group is actually right about a number of things
3. Need to change social media
    1. Age access must be older
        1. Currently 13, emotional harm for kids going through puberty on social media, particularly girls that gravitate toward visual images, boys have their own issues with violent games
    2. Identity must be validated
        1. Bots, antisemitsim
4. Need to read each other's opinions, focus on shared values, what we agree on, not where we disagree. Hille/Shamai
    1. Go to a moral community that you disagree with, acknowledging something that they're right about, which it might be hard in these cases, but even still, you can do it if, if you think hard.
    2. Find agreement, reject confirmation bias, seek truth

You believe what the government is telling you? You're a fool, they only want to control you, manipulate you, they are hiding the facts, it's a conspiracy and you're falling for it. Worse you're complicit in the coverup. You're everything that is wrong with what they are doing."

Or the opposite, "You see conspiracy theories where any rational person would see science and facts and best intentions. You're buying into old racial, gender, antisemitic troupes; you're being played! You're not a stupid person but you're acting like an idiot."