After the Tower Fell
Rosh Hashanah Day 5783
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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 email filled up 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. It seems more and more, when people get together, even in the same family there is always conflict. If there isn’t it’s because we stopped inviting those people we disagree with.

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 uncle Steve sits down with his Trucker Convoy T-shirt and proudly declares he never got vaccinated, never got COVID and insists that all of us are being controlled by the government and brainwashed by fake news and the “Lame Stream Media”.

And then across the table, sits cousin Shoshana who comes in her Black Lives Matter / Free Palestine bandana and tells us that we are all preening in our privilege and have nothing to say about what’s happening to the most marginalized and vulnerable in our society. Because everything we say is simply a rationalization of our white or middle class, colonial, overly educated privilege.

Our hand hovers by our kiddush ready to propose a toast because at any moment they might realize they are in the presence of the enemy. Decades after Hebrew school, in that moment it dawns on us, this must be why the rabbis ordained we should drink four cups of wine at seder.

Increasingly, 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 accept our differences; of opinion, lifestyle, identity, orientation, race, religion, politics.

It's like we are living in the days after Babel, when humanity was scattered to the far ends of the earth, our language confounded so we wouldn't understand each other."

As social psychologist Jonathan Haidt points out, "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."[1]

"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."[2]

Here, in the Babel of 2022 each side has its own narrative, which excludes the other. That in itself is bad but what has made it so destructive is that there is no incentive to compromise or reach consensus, just the opposite.

In the social media fueled Babel of 2022 there can be no compromise, **our politics have become our religion, and when that happens changing your mind becomes heresy. Associating with the other side is blasphemy. Grounds for excommunication, banishment.**

We have come to think that speaking with the other side, watching their news, reading their opinions is a sin; it's not a sin - it's a Mitzvah!

Here is the message I want you to take into this New Year: Debate and difference of opinion are not the enemy, they are how we arrived at the truth.

Judaism does not only welcome diversity of opinion, it insists on it. It is only through that process of the vigorous exchange of ideas that we get to knowledge, then to wisdom and ultimately to EMET to truth.

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. So his students decide to send him a new study partner, R. Elazar.

The Talmud tells us that, "On every word that R. Yohanan said, R. Elazar agreed with him."

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[1] "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid", Jonathan Haidt, The Atlantic April 11, 2022
[2] ibid.

Finally R. Yohanan can't take it anymore and he lashes out at R. Elazar, "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.' I already know that what I say is right, [I need a wise person to tell me why I'm wrong]."

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.

American author and journalist, Jonathan Rauch writes about what he calls, "The Constitution of Knowledge"[3] a tradition that can be traced back to Aristotle, Plato and even the Talmudic Academies before them that embrace this process of exhaustive inquiry and truth seeking.

Not to destroy your thought opponent as is so often the case in our online debates, on talk radio, podcasts and cable news but to engage with them so that you can both arrive at agreed upon truths, even if those truths are contradictory.

Rauch teaches that this Constitution of Knowledge, the rules by which arrive at facts and truth is based upon three fundamental principles:

1. **Human Fallibility** - that no one has final say and there is no personal authority. Anyone can be wrong so no one person can shut everyone else up and say they have reached the right answer so everyone can go home.
2. **Empirical Evidence** - knowledge is not made by yourself, it must be checked with others. Anyone can contribute, bring wholly different perspectives and create objective knowledge. We have seen that with race, gender roles, sexual orientation, whether the earth is flat or round. New information constantly emerges, new facts, science, technologies come into play.
3. **Diversity of view point** - Having enough different factions and viewpoints so they can check each other. One person's confirmation bias cancels out another. You don't understand anything until you get people to criticize it and understand it.

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 for the Babel of 2022.

Maybe the best example is the way Hillel and Shammai debated the intricacies and requirements of Jewish law.

They weren't just rabbis in the passover haggadah, they were leaders of schools, of academics with thousands of students.

[3] "The Constitution of Knowledge - A Defense of Truth" Jonathan Rauch, Brookings Institution Press 2021

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 Uncle Steven and Cousin Shoshana.

The split between them was so deep that, according to the Talmud, "the Torah became like two Torahs [when they would debate its meaning]".

But they followed two rules that we must learn as a society if we have any hope of bridging this divide.

FIRST: 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. They did not let disputes in one area prevent not only friendship, but even cooperation in other areas.

SECOND: 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 that of Beit Shammai, in fact they would teach the opinion of Beit Shammai first.

It takes great confidence in one's own views to be able to validate the views of others.

One can forbid or permit, declare pure or impure, validate or disqualify. But one must always be cognizant that others may and often do see things differently.

In the Talmud students of Hillel and Shammai engaged in debate to seek truth, on Facebook we engage in debate to seek destruction.

For the last 10 years, since 2012 and the introduction of the Like Button we have been tearing down our leaders, our institutions, our academics, our shared stories and histories to build ourselves up. We feel better, we struck a blow against the enemy of all we hold sacred. Our side cheers, their side retaliates in an even more extreme way. Everyone gets more clicks, more likes, retweets from the very people who already agree with you. Not a single mind is changed but each position is hardened. We feel better, our society gets that much sicker.

19th Century British Philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote, "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 there will be little left to have a complete picture."

How do we restore civility and reason in our society, how do we heal this divide?

I'm not talking about tolerance, which while important is superficial; merely the appearance of getting along with each other.

How do we restore fact and truth so that we can once again understand each other, speak the same language, learn from each other; have shared stories, shared beliefs, shared purpose?

We need to do three things:

ONE: We need to be conscious of what game we are playing when we sit down with Uncle Steve, Cousin Shoshana. Do we want to change their minds, defeat them, show off how smart we are, or learn?

All but the last of those goals, 'learn' are incompatible and foolish. We will be angry all the time. Not have any positive impact on the world. We'd be much better off asking questions to try to draw them out and be curious because it turns out each group is actually right about a number of things. That's Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Leikish, that's the verse right here on my tallit; "azeh hu hacham, halomed m'kol adam / who is wise? The one who learns from all people." The person who thinks they have nothing to learn is a fool.[4]

TWO: We need to read each other's opinions, follow each other's news sources. Not to confirm our biases, but to challenge them. Go to a moral community that you disagree with and acknowledge something that they're right about. It might be hard, you might have to hear a lot you fundamentally oppose, that offends you. So what listening is not agreeing, listening to views you disagree with is learning, seeking knowledge. So listen, listen for values not policy. Find agreement, reject confirmation bias, seek truth.

You can try this in a few minutes on your ride home or on the way to Rosh Hashanah lunch. Turn on that news channel you never listen to, that you think is Fake News. As you listen, focus on shared values, what you agree on, not where you disagree. If you haven't heard something by the time you get to where you're going, you'll try again another time, but keep trying to understand where they are coming from; that's Hillel and Shami.

THIRD: You're already doing it by being here. The importance of us living together, singing together, coming together physically, moving together in time this is how humans bind themselves together - synagogue community. COVID only exacerbated a divide that had been growing for decades.

What holds a society together is our relationships with each other, our institutions and our shared stories, that's exactly what a synagogue is. Come to synagogue, get involved, it will save your life, your family, your sanity, it will save our society. That's the purpose of Judaism, that's the real meaning of what it means to be part of this community.

[4] "A fool thinks himself to be wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool." From Shakespeare's comedy 'As You Like It' (5.1)

In the world after the Tower of Babel has fallen and the people have been scattered, their language jumbled, our purpose is NOT to rebuild the tower, it's to rebuild relationships, trust, community. To build not a tower but a world filled with love, peace and understanding. Debate and difference of opinion are not the enemy, they are how we arrived at the truth.

That has been true since the beginning of Judaism, it must still be true today.

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