

ROSH HASHANA 5775
THE VALUE OF DIALOGUE
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

We all know the expression: Two Jews, three opinions. Jews are often contentious. We argue, we don't take yes for an answer. The following joke rings so true.

A Jewish congregation was arguing over whether one should stand or sit during the Shema. Half of the congregation said one should sit, the other half insisted one should stand. Every time the Shema was recited they shouted at each other, "Sit down!" and "Stand up!" The fighting became so bad that the congregation was split in two, each half contending that they knew the tradition in that synagogue. Finally, the rabbi decided to visit a one hundred year old member of the synagogue who was living in a nursing home. He took a delegation with him from each of the arguing sides.

"Now, tell us," said the rabbi, "what is our tradition?" "Should we stand during the Shema?" "No," said the old man. "That is not our tradition." "So, then," asked the rabbi, "should we sit during the Shema?" "No," the old man replied, "that is not our tradition." "But we need to know what to do," said the rabbi, "because our members are fighting among each other." "Now that," said the oldest member of the congregation, "that is our tradition."¹

Arguing is as Jewish as matza ball soup or brisket. But there is a good reason for that. It is what we are meant to do as Jews. And that's why I believe that our father, Abraham, failed his final test.

Tomorrow, we read one of the most disturbing stories in the Torah. The Torah tells us that God put Abraham to the test by telling him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Without a word, Abraham complies. That's right: Abraham does not offer one word of protest. He gets up early in the morning, saddles his donkey, and heads up the mountain with his son, Isaac. His wife Sarah is probably asleep when he leaves, and he does not bother to inform her of his plan. The only thing that

¹ <http://jbuff.com/c110101.htm>

prevents him from plunging the knife into his son's breast is an angel ordering him to stop.

The rabbis seem disturbed enough about Abraham's lack of response that they supply his end of the dialogue in a midrash – an interpretation of the story. The Torah is terse. All God says is: "Take your son, your only one, the one you love, Isaac." Abraham is silent.

Here is how the rabbis rewrite the scene. In their version, Abraham, seeming to sense something ominous, employs a kind of delaying tactic: God says: "Take your son." Abraham replies: "But I have two sons." God: "Your only one." Abraham: "But each is the only one to his mother." (Remember that Abraham has a son, Ishmael, with Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant, and a son, Isaac, with Sarah). God replies: "The one you love." Abraham answers: "I love them both." Then God specifies: "Isaac."

Readers and commentators have often compared this story to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In that story, God reveals to Abraham that these cities will be destroyed and Abraham engages in a vehement dialogue, employing a different kind of delaying tactic: "Far be it from You to do such a thing," Abraham cries out, "to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty. Far be it from You. Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly? What if there are 50 righteous people in these cities?" Abraham asks God. "If there are 50 righteous people, I will not destroy the cities," says God. "What if there are 40 righteous people?" retorts Abraham. "I will not destroy them for the sake of the 40," says God. "What if there are 30?" asks Abraham. God relents for 30. And so on, until Abraham bargains God down to 10.

Our tradition wonders why Abraham argues to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah whereas he does not say a word to save his own son. One of the answers is that Abraham is willing to speak up for others but that he is willing to sacrifice himself, or what is his, in order to prove his great faith in God. Indeed, he proves his faith at the very beginning of his story when God tells him to leave his homeland, Haran, and go to Canaan. Here too Abraham obeys God in silence.

Because of this, Abraham is considered the epitome of faith, the Knight of Faith according to Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Medieval philosopher and rabbi, Saadia Gaon, claims that God did not test Abraham through the binding of

Isaac. Rather, God sought to publicize this model of faithfulness. In this understanding, Abraham is a sign of righteousness for the rest of the world. Rather than testing Abraham, “God exalted Abraham, through trial, to greatness.”

I don't think that I am the only one who finds this display of blind faith to be problematic. Why? Because our tradition encourages us to engage in dialogue, to ask questions. We are not supposed to click our heels and obey. And that is why I think Abraham failed the test. When God told him to sacrifice Isaac, he should have argued with God. We are supposed to be God wrestlers.

We are b'nai Yisrael, the children of Israel, the name our forefather Jacob received after he contended with God and succeeded. This is how our rabbis have always tackled issues, that is, engaging in healthy debates while respecting each other's point of view.

And this is exactly how our Talmud is written. Many opinions, almost none of them definitive. Rabbis arguing with each other over time – from one century to the other – and over space – from one country to the other. A story in the Talmud about two famous and very learned rabbis will illustrate the point.

Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan were the best of friends as well as study partners. During one of their arguments, they insulted one another which resulted in the end of their friendship. Yohanan would not forgive Reish Lakish who then fell ill and died. Yohanan was so despondent that his friends found him a new study partner. This new partner agreed with every opinion about the law that Rabbi Yohanan gave. Rabbi Yohanan complained: “When I stated a law, Reish Lakish used to raise twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the law; while you only prove that what I say is true. Do I not know myself that my opinions are correct?” Thus he went on rending his garments and weeping, 'Where are you, Reish Lakish, where are you, O Reish Lakish;’ and he cried thus until his mind was turned. Thereupon the Rabbis prayed for him, and he died.²

It is through posing questions and engaging in dialogue that we are able to broaden our horizons and open our minds to different ideas. As Buddhist philosopher Daisaku Ikeda has said: “The true value of dialogue is not to be found

² Baba Mezi'a 84a

solely in the results it produces but also in the process of dialogue itself, as two human spirits engage with and elevate each other to a higher realm...Without dialogue, humans are fated to walk in the darkness of their own dogmatic self-righteousness. Dialogue is the lamp by which we dispel that darkness, lighting and making visible for each other our steps and the path ahead.”³ Think about people who are closed to dialogue. They KNOW that they are right and cannot brook any argument from another point of view. Indeed, facts do not get in the way of their beliefs. We all know people like that. Some of them are even in our government.

A great example of such a person in our Torah is Korach who instigates a rebellion against Moses in the desert. Moses tries to persuade him and his allies to relent.

But Korach refuses to respond. The midrash explains his actions as follows: “With all these arguments Moses tried to win Korach over, yet you do not find that the latter returned him any answer. This was because he was clever in his wickedness and thought: ‘If I answer him, I know quite well that he is a very wise man and will presently overwhelm me with his arguments so that I shall be reconciled to him against my will. It is better that I should not join issue with him.’ When Moses saw that he could do nothing with him he took leave of him.” Imagine that: Korach does not want to speak to Moses because he might be convinced by Moses’ reasonable arguments!

When Sarah is upset about how uppity her maidservant Hagar behaves after she becomes pregnant by Abraham, Sarah orders Abraham to banish Hagar. Abraham is torn, not knowing what to do. God advises him to listen to Sarah’s voice. As Rabbi Jill Zimmerman pointed out, God is not telling Abraham to obey Sarah. What God is telling Abraham to do is to listen to what is beneath her words, to the feelings she is expressing. God is asking Abraham to try and understand Sarah’s point of view in this story, her sense of betrayal and vulnerability.

Even God learns from interchanges with human beings. According to the midrash, in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham explains to God: “If you want to have a world, there can be no complete justice, and if justice is what you want, there can be no world. You are holding the rope at both ends. You want a world and you want justice. If you don't give in a bit, the world can never stand.” In this story, God learns to temper God’s desire for strict justice with the need for compassion. Our relationship with God is thus a mutual one. As Rabbi David Hartman notes:

³ http://www.ikedaquotes.org/dialogue/dialogue415?quotes_start=7

“[Abraham’s] insistence on his own ethical intuition, and God’s acceptance, in turn, of those claims – is, for me, the foundation of the covenantal relationship....”

In the same way, Moses argues with God when God is intent on destroying the people because of the sin of the Golden Calf. “The Midrash describes Moses grabbing hold of God and saying to Him, ‘I’m not going to let you do what you want to do to the Jews.’ Rabbi Hartman explains that: “Moses has to convince God not to allow His ‘emotions’ to overpower Him, not to let His anger consume Him.”

Just think about how much more effective our government could be were the Republicans and the Democrats able to speak with each other. Or what better family relationships there might be if brothers and sisters could really hear each other.

The traditional way for people to engage in study is through Hevruta – where people pair up and tackle a text together. Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, tells us that “When two sit together and there are words of Torah between them, the *Shekhinah* – the Divine Presence – is between them.” Why is that? According to a Hassidic rabbi, “When two sit together, each one craves to hear a new word from the mouth of his friend. And through this [craving] their friend is aroused and his heart opens up to him like a fountain to create new words of Torah. And so it is for his companion. Therefore it says ‘words **of Torah between them**’ – for it is between the two of them that words of Torah, reverence and instruction are newly created . . . **the Shekhinah – Divine Presence – is between them, as it says . . . ‘engaged each other in conversation**’ – it does not say ‘spoke,’ but, rather, ‘engaged each other in conversation,’ for each one speaks through the arousal of his companion.”⁴

Rabbi Haim Soloveichik calls the silent Abraham “the lonely man of faith.” For Dr. Rabbi Tamara Eskenazi, “...lone men have the easier task. The harder task is to live as a family and negotiate the complexity of competing needs and responsibilities. That is the greater challenge.”

Just think: If Abraham had not left early in the morning to take his son as a sacrifice, leaving a sleeping Sarah in the dark about his plans. What if Abraham had shared his call from God with her. Surely she would have tried to dissuade

⁴ Rabbi Yitzḥaq Eiziq Yehudah Yehiel Safrin of Komarno (1806 – 1874) was a great *rebbe* – Hassidic Master, and was a student of R. Zvi Hirsch of Zydachov. He was a master of exoteric and esoteric Torah, often combining both aspects in his writings. This excerpt is from his commentary to Pirke Avot, Notzer Hesed, Israel, 1982.

him from following through on this mad idea. Perhaps they would have figured things out as a couple and saved their son from the trauma of almost being slaughtered.

In another context, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks warns us of the danger inherent in the absence of dialogue. In the story of Cain and Abel, the two brothers are out in the field. The text then tells us: “And Cain said” which is followed by an ellipsis – three dots. Rabbi Sacks says: “The fractured syntax represents a fractured relationship. The conversation broke down. ‘And Cain said’ – but his speech goes no further, and there was nothing but silence and tension. When words fail, violence begins.”⁵

It is through conversation that we have any chance at understanding one another and any hope for peace. Rabbi Sacks quotes what he calls, “a beautiful phrase” in the Talmud: “*Ein sichah elah tefillah*” which he translates as “conversation is a form of prayer.” “Why?” he asks. “Because in conversation I reach out to the human other, just as in prayer I reach out to the Divine other.”⁶

May we continue to listen to each other even if we don’t like what we hear because sacred listening is a way for *kol ha neshama tehallel ya* – for every soul to praise God.

HALLELUJAH!

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *Future Tense*, p. 188.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.