

Kol Nidre 5777
October 11, 2016

I want you to imagine something. I want you to imagine you are listening to someone on TV whose opinions and beliefs you cannot stand. Do you stop yourself and say, well, let me listen respectfully? Of course not! For almost all of us, our fists clench, our bodies shake, and we want to throw something at the screen. In a seminar on the current presidential election, my colleague Rabbi Lauren Berkun informed us that this is a reaction practically programmed in our DNA. We cannot always condemn this as mere intolerance, either. Sometimes anger is warranted. Many Jews strongly believe in much of the agenda of the Black Lives Matter movement. That is why we were deeply hurt and offended when BLM included in its official platform a statement so anti-Israel it accuses it of “genocide” against Palestinians. No matter where you stand on Israel politics, this is a blatant lie. The statement has caused many left wing and right wing Jews to unite in anger.

In a response, Alan Dershowitz said decent people should completely shun the Black Lives Matter movement until it removes this

“blood libel” from its platform. But David Bernstein, the president of the Jewish Council on Public Affairs, challenges his approach. He says that the most salient reason for the deep link that has developed between BLM and the Palestinian cause is that Jews are no longer really involved in the civil rights movement:

Notwithstanding our self-image as modern-day activists walking in the footsteps of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the community has been largely absent from today’s civil rights tables. It should come as no surprise that we have little influence on a movement we are not involved with. It is past time we re-engage.

He goes on to say that such re-engagement will not be easy, because the current causes are a bit messier than the injustice of segregation, and because many Jews find the language of young activists extreme, even on issues not dealing with Israel. But he rejects the idea of -- for example -- Jewish representatives not coming to civil rights meeting where Black Lives Matter participates. In Bernstein’s words, “Such

litmus tests are a prescription for Jewish isolation, not greater influence over the direction of the movement.”

I feel a little conflicted about this. A part of me wants to go with Dershowitz’s model. After all, we have our pride, and we have a right to our anger. But the truth is, there is almost no chance of change in these kinds of situations when you simply refuse to engage. And that is true in a whole host of other issues, as well.

The model of destructive conflict in the Torah is Korach’s rebellion. Korach is a wealthy Levite who challenges Moses’ leadership. The Rabbis use it as the classic example of a disagreement she-lo l’shem shamayyim, not for the sake of heaven. That is, argument is fine when both sides have a valid point, like the discussions that pepper the Talmud, but when you have Korach and his hoarde, let the earth swallow them up. The midrash says Korach makes up mocking questions about Torah, like whether an all-blue tallit still needs tzitzit with one blue thread. But nevertheless, we learn:

וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה לִקְרֹא לְדָתָן וְלָאֲבִירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא נֵעֲלֶה: יג הַמַּעֲט כִּי הָעֵלִיתָנוּ
מֵאֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ לְהַמִּיתָנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר כִּי־תִשְׁתַּחֲרַר עָלֵינוּ גַם־הַשְׁתַּחֲרַר:

Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab; but they said, “We will not come! ¹³Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us? ¹

Moses is willing to reach out even to the most obstinate of his enemies. In this case, unsuccessfully. It is they who refuse to engage, and ultimately the rebellion comes to a harsh end. How prepared are we to speak calmly with those whose opinions we believe are off the wall?

For me, one of these issues is gun control. Given the constant episodes of gun violence, it drives me nuts that there are people who refuse to consider a single gun safety law. Some of these people claim that the people need to be able to defend themselves against the government if it tries to gain too much power. That seems like a far-out

¹ Jewish Publication Society. (1985). *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Nu 16:12–13). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

scenario, and we have real people in front of us getting slaughtered with automatic weapons wielded by unstable people. If I end up in a conversation with one of these people, I find it hard to take their argument seriously. Frankly, I feel we have no common ground on this particular issue.

But is that the approach that will heal our country? I have to challenge myself. The Toldos Yaakov Yosef, the first Chasidic book ever published, interprets the verse *shiviti adonai l'negdi tamid*, "I have set Adonai before me always." The Hebrew word *l'negdi*, before me, literally means *negdiyut*, opposition. And so this author says:

It seems to me, according to what I have received from my teachers and friends, that one should behave compassionately with every person. Even where one sees something ugly in another person. one should give heart to the fact that there too dwells the name of the Blessed One, for there is no place empty of God.

Therefore, it is for one's own good, for there is, in you too, a trace of that [ugliness] and you should give heart, to do teshuvah.

The Toldot Yaakov Yosef therefore reads this verse, "I always see God in my opponent." Even where we find another's opinion "ugly," it is incumbent on us to soften our view. When we feel our body tense and a sarcastic comment coming on, do we have the strength to stop ourselves and see God in our opponent? This does not necessarily mean seeing any truth to their words. Israel is not committing genocide. Global warming is real. But it perhaps means achieving an inkling of understanding of how this person came to believe this. Where does he come from? What were his life experiences? Perhaps he or she is not as evil or implacably immune to reason as you thought. And perhaps engagement instead of excommunication will begin to break down the walls.

Unfortunately, our country has not begun to do this. Shows like the McLaughlin Group (of the recently late commentator) and CNN's former show Crossfire became popular by presenting people, rigidly cast

as from the right or from the left, yelling at each other. I believe it is no accident that someone from that school of reality television, someone who tried to patent the phrase “you’re fired!” became a major presidential candidate. It may make for good entertainment, but I am not at all sure it is good for society.

In an editorial, Forward editor Jane Eisner writes of how it bothered her that -- according to polls -- a significant number of Americans and Israelis hold what she considers extreme -- even offensive -- views. She concludes:

Is this really my America? Is this really my Israel?

True pluralism demands that I answer yes, no matter how uncomfortable that is. Pluralism isn’t only an argument for others to accept me; it’s a call for me to accept others, or at least try to understand them. It’s damn hard and I don’t pretend that I’m good at it, nor that understanding will lead to excusing beliefs and behaviors I personally reject. But if I don’t try to engage the

Americans and Israelis with whom I disagree, how can I ever hope to shift their attitudes?

We can never be certain that such an approach will change the minds and hearts we most want to change. We cannot predicate everything we do on the dicey proposition of changing others. But I do not believe that non-engagement is always going to have the desired effect either. Let us fight for truth as eloquently as we can. But may we also see the bit of the Holy One that is always there in our opponents, even in the ugliness. May our hearts be more open than closed to our fellows. It is this attitude that will both apply and realize the spiritual truth, *leit atar panui mineh*, “There is no place empty of God.”

