

Every Little Thing
Yom Kippur Morning 5783
October 5, 2022

It is Yom Kippur, a day which demands fasting and a deep, searing introspective honesty. So I am, of course, going to open with an invented anecdote, about a meal.

A waitress approaches a group of Jewish diners when it looked as if they were finishing up, and ready to move on. With great trepidation, she asks: "was anything alright?"

We are a famously cantankerous people. We excel at arguing. It is not just that we can be disagreeable. We often disagree! You know the phrase "two Jews, three opinions." Or the story of Chaim, the first Jew on the moon. His friend Shlomo rockets up for a visit, to discover that Chaim has built not one, but *two* synagogues. Chaim explains: "Of course I built two synagogues. One I pray in; the other I wouldn't be caught dead in."

We are argumentative – and we ask many questions. Even iconoclastic ones. We love to challenge established ideas.

I am deeply drawn to two readings from the Yom Kippur version of *Mishkan HaNefesh*, the new *machzor* of the Reform movement, which, maybe, someday, I hope, we may use here. One is a poem, the other a song.

The first is by the Israeli poet and aspiring atheist Yaakov Orland, who wrote the following, directed to God: "I know, I am certain and have already proven to myself a thousand and one times – that you do not exist, that you are nothingness, that you are without, that you are a thread hung over the abyss.

What disturbs and annoys me and embarrasses me time and time again,” he went on, “is the mystery of the necessity I feel to inform you of this every day, and to share with you my personal conclusions.” (MhN YK p. 317).

This is in a prayerbook! Astonishing!

But equally amazing is this passage, words which question and undercut and embrace all at the same time. It is by Leonard Cohen – his musical midrash on *Netaneh Tokef*, ending with a chutzpadik question: “Who by fire? Who by water? Who in the sunshine? Who in the night time? Why by high ordeal? Who by common trial? Who in your merry, merry month of May? Who by very slow decay? *And who shall I say is calling?*” (MhN YK, p. 207)

This is nothing less than... well, my phrase for it is “the sanctification of doubt.” On Yom Kippur, at least, we are open to every voice. We welcome as widely as we can. And we include in the anthology of expression called the *machzor* even grappling, and struggle, and angst.

It is true, and painfully obvious, that we live at a time of great division. Sometimes it is hard to know how to rise above the passion we feel about our own positions, and even attempt to bring us all together. A colleague and friend wanted to speak about Israel this High Holy Days. She knows, however, that no matter what she says, someone will be upset. Maybe instead of saying that she was talking about Israel, she could announce that she was going to talk *about* talking about Israel. And yet, with the waitress in the restaurant, even that would not sit well with everyone.

But this is not the first time we have faced factions and divisiveness, we Jews. The story of Chanukah begins in a civil conflict between Jews who favor the tradition-honoring Ptolemaic Empire, the Egyptian-Greeks, and those who prefer to be subjects of the cosmopolitan Seleucids, the Syrian Greeks. The first century gave us sects with names we know even if we do not always understand their relative positions: Essenes, Zealots, Sadducees, Pharisees, along with devotees of another leader whose later followers ultimately went in a bit of a different direction. The second century saw a rift between those who sought to retreat from politics, and accommodate the rule of Rome, and others who embraced resistance and rebellion.

Even within the same party, descendants of Pharisees and precursors of the Talmudic rabbis, there was a famous split so fierce it nearly tore us apart.

Shammai was the keeper of standards, defender of the faith, meticulous and precise. Hillel, at least by reputation, was creative and flexible. They shared the same dedication to keeping the flame of Jewish faith alive, but they came to very different conclusions about how to get there.

Their approaches were so different that their argument lasted beyond their lifetimes. Out of their teachings grew a school of Shammai, Beit Shammai, and a school of Hillel, Beit Hillel. It came to a point when one said white, and the other said black. And the community did not know what to do.

Enter the Talmud, famous for meandering discourse and guidance which is often... less than clear. But in this case, the Talmud takes a side. Sort of. At least, it gives some direction in what we are supposed to do.

א"ר אבא אמר שמואל שלש שנים נחלקו ב"ש וב"ה הללו אומרים
הלכה כמותנו והללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו יצאה בת קול ואמרה
אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים הן והלכה כב"ה

For three years there was a dispute between Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel. Bet Shammai would say, 'The *halachah* is in agreement with our views.' Bet Hillel contended, 'The *halachah* is in agreement with our views.' Then a *bat kol*, a heavenly voice announced: '*Elu v'elu divrei Elohim chayim*, these and these - the teachings of both groups --are the words of the living God. But the *halachah* follows Bet Hillel.'

B.T. Eruvin 13b

So, we have a resolution. Except. Wait a minute. This is ridiculous! How can this be? How can they both be right? How can they both be the words of the living God? One says east, and the other says west.

The usual interpretation of this *sugya*, this Talmudic passage, is that yes, opposite answers *can* both be correct. Actual truth is so far beyond our ability to understand it that it is like some Cubist painting, different facets seen from every side, and human perception but a partial representation of reality. And someday, Elijah the Prophet will return, not only to announce the arrival of the Messiah, but also to show us how both answers can be right.

I found this to be *almost* a beautiful teaching. It effectively punts the problem down the road into an unspecified future. I shrugged and lived with this until...

Until a few years ago I heard a new approach, one which perhaps explains this paradox in a much more satisfying way. Imagine mathematics. In complex equations, you make a move with brackets. If you put brackets around something it means: do this function first! [Alick Isaacs.]

So using brackets it's not that "these *and* these," two different things, are both correct. That's... look, that's obviously absurd.

Rather it is: "*these and these...*" that is, *the debate itself*, the quest for truth, the weighing of options and balancing of differences, *that... that* is the word of the living God. Yes, answers and outcomes are important. But what is sacred here is not the result. It is the debate, the argument, the journey, the search itself. Not the product. The *process*!

I would add, here, that not every argument meets this criterion. Division which dehumanizes, which enflames and stokes fear, which undermines the process itself fails this test. It is a threat to the entire system. Civil discourse decays into civic strife. The words can get hot when the stakes are so high. Disagreement over issues yields to disparagement of identity. When this happens, honesty demands that we see it for what it is and call it out as beyond the pale.

But sometimes in our lives – and more often than we might think -- maturity means simply the ability to hold in both of our hands two stances, two positions, two views that do not go perfectly together, and to... live with both.

It is Yom Kippur. It is the Day of Atonement, a time when we are to do the work of making this world a better place. Very nice. Great idea. But how?

We return, once again, to Hillel and Shammai, and a debate over repentance, restoration, making right something which was once wrong. The issue at hand is what to do about a pilfered plank, a stolen beam.

תנו רבנן: גזל מריש ובנאו בבירה, ב"ש אומרים: מקעקע כל הבירה כולה
ומחזיר מריש לבעליו, וב"ה אומרים: אין לו אלא דמי מריש בלבד,
משום תקנת השבין

The one who stole a beam and built it into a residence. Beit Shammai says he must tear down the entire residence, so that the rightful owner may take the beam. But Beit Hillel says: calculate the monetary value of the beam, and give that to the owners, because of *takkanat shavim*.

Takkanat HaShavim can be roughly rendered as “compensatory justice.” Balancing the scales, repairing a rift, making things... equivalent. The idea here is “to encourage or reward proper behavior,” or, “not to place obstacles in the path of those who would repent.”

This is a... *very* important argument. Beit Shammai’s answer seems to be a far purer form of justice. Look, you stole a beam. So, you already used it to build something else? Tough. *Give the beam back!* The same piece of wood. No matter what you must tear down to do it!

Anything built on a false foundation, the entire structure, everything that follows is suspect. It all should go. *M’akeya kol haBirah Kulah!* Rip it out! Tear it all down. Literally and physically, put things back the way they were.

Beit Hillel's answer seems less satisfying. It is an accommodation. It is clearly a compromise. The stolen beam itself remains right where it was when illicitly deployed.

But this may be the better answer, *both* for one who would try to improve, *and* for moving forward in the world.

We can't always take everything back. We can't make things exactly, completely, literally as they were. Work it out, figure it out... Justice mixed with common sense, human understanding, and a dose of pragmatism.

So what is the lesson, the balance between the two positions? How does this work.... In our lives? In our community? As a society? As a country? As part of the world?

How do we make things better? Do we *undo*, or renew? Do we go back, or do we move on?

When you delete something from your computer, is it actually gone? When you take something off the internet, can you erase every thread?

Can we repair a relationship by just eliminating every hurt, every harm we caused? Do we wave a wand, and everyone agrees: the words were never said? Or do we try to understand, open ourselves to the impact we have had, and move forward from there?

We face this challenge, this balance, with almost every complex issue we confront. Do North American cities “give back” tribal land which was stolen? How, and to whom? Do we heal the planet by pumping oil *back* into the pits from which it came, or by some kind of compensation, accommodation, taking a new level of responsibility for tomorrow?

We live at a time when too many people - public figures and private individuals alike - seem utterly incapable of saying we are sorry. Why are we so afraid to apologize? Do we think it will make us look weak? Or do we want to shirk the work which follows admitting we were wrong? Are we afraid to own the past out of actual ignorance, or unwillingness to change?

This day calls us, and everything is on our plate... *except* for food. Our past, our future, our outlook, our character. It is never easy to deal with complexity, questions with no easy answers or simple solutions, situations in which no remedy is obvious, and nothing is really right.

We can make our love, make our world better by asking honest questions and listening to many voices. With an openness to uncertainty.

I am haunted, this season, by two final songs. The first I shared in my message in *The Tidings*, our synagogue bulletin. It is by Israel singer Hanan Ben-Ari. It is called *Ga’agu’im L’vnai Adam*, Longings for Human Beings.” Its lyrics are addressed – powerfully – to the pandemic. To COVID itself.

The ending of the songs says:

עוד מעט זה הכל ייגמר
 ואני מבקש אם אפשר
 שבבוקר אחרי שתלכי
 לא נהיה שוב אותו הדבר

Soon enough this will all be over.
 And I request this, if I may.
 That on the morning after you leave
 things will not just go back to the way they were before.

Making things better does not mean going back. It means being
 different, moving on.

Lastly, there is this, the unofficial theme song of the Caribbean, from
 where my family has just moved. In response to the waiter at the beginning of
 these remarks, and with a huge “if”...

If we do the work we need to this day, to balance and to weigh, examine
 our lives from every angle, ask hard questions, if we go deep and try hard, open
 up and move ahead then, perhaps, we can say, then we can sing... “every little
 thing... is going to be alright.”

L'shana Tovah.