

The Values We Express When We Disagree.

Two thousand years ago, Jewish leaders were engaged in a serious debate. According to the book of Deuteronomy, financial debts were forgiven every seven years. Imagine taking out a mortgage or a school loan and having the entire loan forgiven in the seventh year. It sounds great! Unless, of course, you are the Charlotte banker. This biblical law created a significant problem: what lender would loan money? A well-intentioned law ended up making everyone's lives more difficult.¹

Two schools of thought emerged. One school, led by Rabbi Shammai, argued that God's laws were given for a reason and cannot be changed. Who are we to question God? It is better to endure the brokenness than to try to fix it. Another group of scholars led by Rabbi Hillel rationalized that laws exist to enable people to live in a fair and equitable society. It is better to change the law than to keep a law that hurts people. Ultimately, the majority of scholars sided with Rabbi Hillel and the Biblical laws were changed. But our texts preserve Rabbi Shammai's minority opinion as valid and important.

As I look back at our last year at Temple Beth El and consider the complex challenges that we have faced as a community, it's hard not to see a similar dynamic here on Providence Road. Some people want to conserve and protect the past. Some want to change what is broken with the desire to create a better future.

Good people – well intentioned people in our congregation – sincerely believe that sweeping change will erode the foundations of our Charlotte spiritual home. From a principled perspective - they do not want Temple's ideals to deteriorate or the values upon which the synagogue was built to collapse. And good and well-intentioned people in our congregation want significant change because they sincerely believe that Temple's future rests on our willingness to transform our present. They argue that if we don't change, our congregation will perish. One people, many, *many*, opinions.

As my mentor, Rabbi David Stern, says: two Jews, three opinions is not just a joke, it's an ethic.²

Of course, listening to multiple opinions can lead to deadlock or inaction. When there are so many nuances and perspectives, the perfect can be the enemy of the good. I'm proud of the steps that our congregation has taken this year. We have preserved our history, lived up to Temple Beth El's founding ideals and the best of Jewish tradition. And we have made changes that will move us towards a brighter tomorrow.

¹ Hillel's Prozbul is discussed in Mishnah Gittin 4.3, Mishnah Sh'vi'it 10.3. In their respectful disagreements, Hillel's creativity and leniency were generally countered by Shammai's conservatism (small C). Shammai does not explicitly comment on the Prozbul. This example of a hermeneutical disagreement is to share a well-known example in the Mishnah in a context that may resonate with the Charlotte Jewish community.

² This is from a sermon given by Rabbi Stern, a copy of which I no longer possess. This is from my memory of what he said (both in the sermon and in mentorship).

We've done this through transparency, congregational gatherings, thoughtful questions, research, discussion, debate, and action. We have listened, learned, and found ways to resolve our differences in a healthy and respectful way. We have much to celebrate. Our work is not done. We can always do better.

In our sacred texts, when scholars like Hillel and Shammai disagreed with each other, the rabbis justified the debate with the words *Eilu v'eilu, divrei Elohim* – both views are the words of God.³

This pluralism encourages us to listen to perspectives that differ from our own. Our sacred texts retain conflicting opinions precisely because Judaism has always emphasized that learning other people's ideas is critical to developing a more holistic and nuanced version of the truth.

Eilu v'Eilu: Good people can disagree about how we preserve and how we grow. They each represent valid perspectives. Our job is to listen and learn.

Eilu v'Eilu: if we don't acknowledge competing perspectives, we may oversimplify the world. Our job is to get beyond the animosity hurled so freely these days.

Eilu v'Eilu: Disagreements are the beginning of a conversation and not their end.⁴

We may not agree – but when everyone is heard, we can better accept our differences.

My high school friend's mother was so sweet — until she watched the nightly news. My friend and I placed bets about when during the broadcast his mother would start screaming obscenities. CNN would report on someone and she'd yell: "That's because he's a Nazi." And if something was particularly egregious, she'd turn off the television and say, "I just can't....I just can't."

It's so easy to find ourselves looking at people who think differently – or who **vote** or act differently – and wonder: What's wrong with them? We may call them names under our breath. We do not want to listen. We ignore them. We think: "If only those people would just listen to the facts...."

This is, of course, wistful thinking. We humans rarely listen to facts when making up our minds. Jonathan Haidt, a University of Virginia psychologist and author of the *Righteous Mind*, explains that when asked questions about moral decisions, people tend to respond spontaneously and then look for facts to justify our intuitive snap-judgements. Contrary to how we like to think our rational minds work, our emotional responses constantly guide our thoughts and behaviors.⁵

This isn't a new phenomenon. After leading the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. When he came down, he saw the people worshipping a Golden Calf. Moses smashed the tablets and went back up the mountain seeking God's mercy and forgiveness. The Eternal One spoke Thirteen Attributes to Moses: *Adonai, Adonai, Eil ra-chum v'-cha-nun, e-rech a-pa-yim, v'-rav che-sed ve-e-met*..... "Adonai, Adonai – a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger,

³ BT Eruvin 13b

⁴ This phrasing is also from Rabbi David Stern, either from the same sermon or from his mentoring. His teaching had an indelible and lasting effect on me.

⁵ The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion by Jonathan Haidt.

abounding in kindness, and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon.”⁶

During these High Holy Days – in our *selichot* prayers of apology and forgiveness – we repeat the Thirteen Attributes over and over. The words don’t just describe God’s compassion and mercy. They are a set of universal behavioral norms – a lived spirituality - for how we can strive to be like God when we relate to the people around us.⁷

When we live with the values of the Thirteen Attributes, we build-up communal trust through being merciful, gracious and kind. Valuing good intent and being slow to anger. Recognizing the complexity of different perspectives. And not oppressing people to get your way.

As your rabbi and as someone who interacts daily with people around their feelings, I can tell you that the minor divisions we faced within our congregation this last year pale in comparison to people’s deep-seated concerns about the divisiveness in our country and our world. Respecting other people’s opinions is often easier said than done.

There is a critical difference between a civil *Eilu v’Eilu* debate and the aggressive language and actions that tear at the fabric of our society. The challenge is to try and keep it all in perspective.

A spiritual thought exercise: Take a moment to close your eyes. Take a breath. Pay attention to your reaction, and what you think and what is triggering for you. Imagine if our president requested to speak at Temple Beth El? How would you personally react upon hearing this news? Open your eyes. Please breathe! There is no announcement. My point is not about the answer that we as a community would come too. Rather, about what kind of conversation we’d have to have with everyone responding having climbed up their ladders of inference and responding with our emotions. It gets more difficult when the rubber hits the road.

It’s too easy to just condemn and say: well, he thinks that way because he’s a fascist. Or she thinks that way because she’s a...*fill in the blank*. Good people *can have* important disagreements. We can’t lose sight of legitimate differences of opinion. The question is not whether we disagree. Instead, we ask: what values do we express when we disagree? Are we like Hillel and Shammai? Or are we sinking into behaviors that sow seeds of hate?

And yet, there is a limit, too. We cannot be Pollyannaish or naïve. There is no space where bullies, white supremacists, can be tolerated. When people’s ideas or actions oppress other humans with venom, those actions are unacceptable. The Thirteen Attributes help us recognize antisemitism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia for what it is – divisive, othering hate speech – a far cry from the principle of *Eilu v’Eilu*, of respectful disagreement and dialogue.⁸

⁶ I did not use the entire Hebrew from the two verses in Exodus 35. The Thirteen Attributes are also found in *Mishkan T’filah*, p. 496

⁷ Rambam, Moreh Nebukim, i. 54

⁸ Thanks to Rabbi Ana Bonnheim and A-J Secrist for helping me [I THINK THIS IS MISSING A VERB?] this frame.

We should be uncomfortable when such behavior is condoned. We should be empowered to call it out for what it is: a danger to a respectful society and healthy future. Our tradition implores us not retreat to our echo chambers or hurl insults under our breaths at the TV or ignore the problem, or stomach those who use hateful speech. Or protect the bullies of the world.

Hate breeds hate. When we see something or hear something, we have to say something. Silence emboldens the haters.

Disagreements *can* be opportunities for serious work if we approach each other with *menschlikeit*. In a world filled with fewer public squares for healthy disagreement, our congregation must model conversations that focus on the possibilities and not just the problems of modern life. If not here, where?

I know we can do it. Because when there were challenges this past year, each of us stepped up in kindness.

Instead of pointing fingers and identifying every historic problem, we have looked to our Jewish moral compasses and charted a course towards the future. It is through our Jewish commitment, in the community that we co-create, that we can model the type of world we want to see, reclaiming the virtues of kindness, courage, bravery, and honesty.

I was contacted recently by a new member in one of Temple's TriBEs. She called to thank Temple. Her mother had died. And during the *shiva* minyan in her home, members of her TriBE showed up with food. They took her out to lunch in the weeks that followed, called and checked-in on her. I asked her about how she built the relationships and she said, "We met in each other's homes. We discussed questions like: 'for whom are we responsible?' And 'What does the world need from you?'"

We shared our ideas. We related stories about our children and the ups and downs of life. We celebrated Shabbat and holidays. Our TriBE is now here for one another – through chemo and job losses and retirements and birthdays and shiva minyans, too."

So, I asked, do you ever disagree? "Sure we do...we're human," she said. But she added – "our disagreements don't define the love and trust we have for each other."

This taught: we are the antidote to the madness of our world. We can respond with a counter-cultural corrective. We can build relationships of meaning and purpose. We can belong and connect with something bigger than ourselves. For all the legitimate fears that we may have about increasing antisemitism or the ills that plague our world, we can choose to feel connected in ways that help us to be strong and versatile enough to face any fear, to tackle any obstacle, and to live joyful lives.

This is why we are expanding TriBEs – our small groups - to the whole congregation.

We may not be able to affect the coarseness of the national discourse. But we can live as proud Jews, rooted in the values of our tradition that celebrate and honor disagreement. We can feel safer and more connected. On this day – and in this New Year – may we move towards a common purpose, discovering the rhythm of life that preserves the essence of the past and advances us towards a better tomorrow.

May we recognize the age-old value of *Eilu v'Eilu*: that our strength lies in our diversity, even among disagreement. And may we live with high values and ideals as we fashion a reciprocal, responsible, and better future holding hands, marching forward, together.⁹

Shanah Tovah.¹⁰

⁹ Michael Walzer – Exodus and Revolution

¹⁰ With thanks and gratitude to my sister-in-law and editor extraordinaire, Julia Bonnheim, my amazing wife, Rabbi Ana Bonnheim, and my clergy colleague thought partners, Cantor Mary Rebecca Thomas and Rabbi Dusty Klass.