

Shabbat Shalom.

Earlier this week, I met with a group of Jewish professionals from across the country for a quarterly Zoom focused on innovative Jewish education. And this time, like the last, was partially devoted to a long check in about how everyone is doing given that everyone on the call serves communities very much in the throes of ongoing communal pain. After sharing many reflections that you might predict, someone posed an enduring question: what am I supposed to do when certain people will not even share a room with me because of my ideological stance?

You could almost hear the sighs of recognition through the screen. Because this is where many of us find ourselves, now, as Jews. The war between Israel and Hamas has exacerbated for us a polarization that has been seething nationally for decades. Where everyone is convinced not only that they're right, but that the other side is evil, unworthy of sharing the same space.

I kept thinking about this question, and later that day I posed it to a married couple that I know. Two Jews, with many more than three opinions between them. Two people whom I knew disagreed about Israel and about so many other things, but who manage to have a kind of James Carville and Mary Matalin style marriage of loving disagreement. I asked them the same question, reframed to ask how they still make it work despite so many issues between them. *He* said they drink a lot of wine. *She* said, every so often, they concede that the other one might be right. And *both* of them admitted to not being experts on the many things about which they disagree.

I don't want to discount the wine in this scenario. But I think the latter point is more germane. In the safety of the love they have for each other, in the humble honesty of their home, they're willing to admit that the other is sometimes right. When I heard this, I was reminded of the Yehuda Amichai poem, "From The Place Where We Are Right." You may know this one. It's short. From the place where we are right/Flowers will never grow/In the

spring./The place where we are right/Is hard and trampled/Like a yard./But doubts and loves/Dig up the world/Like a mole, a plow./And a whisper will be heard in the place/Where the ruined/House once stood.

I love this poem. And I return to it over and over again when preparing for the High Holidays. Because every one of us goes through life convinced that we're right. And yet, especially around the time of the High Holidays, we're forced to confront the ways in which we're not everything we want to be. *Including* right. And as we seek now to bridge the gap between the sides of our families or our Jewish community or, somewhat more dauntingly, to reach across the aisle in American political life, I think it's worth admitting to ourselves that we're not always correct, and sometimes, we don't know what's right or true.

Now, before I get too flowery here, I want to be clear that I'm not trying to engage in both sides-ism, or to present a middle path as it relates to any particular issue. I do think there's generally merit in compromise, but I'll concede that sometimes, one side really is correct and sometimes it's necessary to cut out certain people from our lives, especially when they fail to see our humanity or right to exist. But those times are rarer than we tend to think. And instead of making a political claim, I want to instead make a rabbinic claim, that if we're to heal these sorts of chasms in our lives – political, familial, or social – perhaps we shouldn't always be so sure of ourselves, so smug, so certain that we're right. And maybe, we ought to start valuing *doubt* a little more, approaching any disagreement with humility.

We used to be better at disagreement. Jews, famously, are good at that. And the Talmud, which is the locus classicus of Jewish debate, gives us an important insight early on. The Talmud opens in its first tractate with a question about when is the right time to say the Shema in the evening. And after a lengthy back and forth from the sages, the Gemara offers an eternally useful lesson: Lamed L'shon'cha Lomar: teach your tongue to say: *Aini Yodea*. I don't know.

It's actually pretty incredible. After pages of rabbis going on and on about what they think is the right time for various things, the Gemara comes in with a mic drop to say: sometimes it's better to admit you don't really know. *Aini Yodea*. Lest we think this is just a one off cute rabbinic maxim, if you pick up Rashi's commentary on either Tanakh or Talmud, you'll read numerous examples of where the greatest textual commentator of all time says exactly those words: *aini yodea*. I don't know.

If Rashi can admit it, on the topic about which he was the singular expert, then so can we.

You might say, well...there's plenty we *do* know. And in the many debates that rage, we need to stick up for ourselves! Or, varyingly, we need to stick up for the oppressed and the voiceless! All of this is true. And there's the rub. The purpose of debate is to receive higher truths together, deeper meaning hidden within the false impression of "sides," which are fixed. Sometimes this means compromise, and sometimes not.

But the bottom line is that we can't have a real conversation if we're convinced that we alone lay claim to truth. Truth is found in the energy between two opposing views, sometimes closer to one than the other. And finding the truth requires the humility that you might be wrong.

Humility is an understated yet essential part of Talmudic debate. And the early rabbis inherited a sense of humility from the priests in this week's Torah portion, Tzav, which begins the laws of the priesthood. The very first thing the priests are commanded to do – after getting dressed...is to take out the trash.

Right at the beginning of the parsha we read, "the priest shall dress in linen raiment, with linen breeches next to his body; and he shall take up the ashes to which the fire has reduced the burnt offering on the altar and place them beside the altar." From context, we can surmise that the whole matter of getting dressed was only necessary to facilitate the sacred work of taking out the trash. After all, once the ashes were placed beside the

altar, the next commandment is for the priests to take off their clothes, and dispose of the ashes outside the camp. Our sages explain that even the priests, whose role was literally commanded by God, needed to humble themselves and be reminded that they were human.

All the more so for the rabbis, who were *not* ordained by God, was the reality of their human fallibility necessary for them to acknowledge. And if for the Talmudic rabbis this was so, it is *even* more so for us. Despite how we might present ourselves on social media, or how we confront people in our day to day lives, none of us is right 100% of the time. And like the rabbis, who adapted Judaism to fit their context after the priesthood fell, each of us needs to get comfortable adapting to new modes of being. Each of us needs to acknowledge where we, too, might be wrong or need to change. And to do that, each of us needs to *break* just a little bit.

Shortly after the Torah portion describes how priests should take out the trash, the text details how they should perform the chatat, the sin offering. And once the sacrifice is complete, we read that any garment or copper vessel the offering touches should be washed. But if the sacrifice was offered in an earthen vessel, the Torah says, the vessel itself must be broken. U'chli cheres asher t'vushal bo yishaver.

The earthen vessel needs to break.

According to a Hasidic commentary known as the Noam Elimelech, “[this] earthen vessel represents a person who has committed an act in order to bring himself satisfaction. And he is similar to the earthen vessel that is shattered, for he has to break himself of that thing.”

In other words, the earthen vessel in which a sin offering is made is a symbol of human beings who, inevitably, make mistakes. Like the vessel, which has to break, so do we have to break just a little bit in order to return to stasis. Like Abraham who called out to God that he was but dust and ashes, so are we merely breath, in bodies of earth. So are we like those clay pots and pans in the Temple, that needed to break from time to time.

And so are we like those priests, who needed reminders that they were only functionaries of God and not gods themselves.

At a time when so much in our world is broken already, it may feel like too much to ask to break ourselves. But when what's broken is the way in which we communicate or relate to each other...every one of us must try to break ourselves just a little bit to make room for the other. To say *aini yodea*, that we don't know. To confront each other from a place other than the one where we are right.

Many of us wish for shlemut, for shalom, for wholeness and for peace. But it may be that the only way to get there is to allow ourselves to break.

Shabbat Shalom.