

When God Weeps (Yom Kippur 2020/5781)

By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

Do we still know how to speak with each other? Do we still know how to debate, to argue, to persuade? Can we still learn from one another? Or is even the thought of engaging with someone who disagrees with you passé, so quaint, so 20th century, so European, so colonial, so patriarchal?

Do we still know how to study? Do we attend school to open our minds to new ideas, or to reinforce what we think we already know? Do teachers inspire us to think freely? Or do they seek to impose a dogma, a creed, one acceptable view?

Do we seek out other opinions? Or, do we spend our days in the echo chamber of those who already agree?

There is a fascinating statement in the Talmud: (Chagigah 5b)

Tanu Rabanan, our Sages taught:

“Al shlosha ha’Kadosh Baruch Hu bocheh aleihem be’chol yom:”

“There are three types of people for whom the Holy One weeps every day:”

“Al she’efshar la’assok be’Torah ve’eino ossek”

“God weeps for the one who is able to engage in study but does not.”

“Al she’i efshar laasok be’Torah ve’ossek”

“God weeps for the one who is unable to engage in study and nonetheless does.”

“Ve’al parnass ha’mitga’eh al ha’tsibbur”

“And God weeps for a leader who lords it over the community.”

The Talmud does not elaborate on these three types of people. Who are they? Are they related? How is an arrogant ruler connected with one who studies, but shouldn’t, or one who doesn’t study, but should? What is so egregious about their behavior that it causes God to weep — every day?

Let me address each of the three categories of people:

1. God weeps for those who are able to engage in Torah and do not.

Learning is among the highest of Jewish values. “The study of Torah exceeds all the other commandments,” our Sages teach. “Study day and night,” the Bible decrees. God weeps for those who are able to engage in study — who have both intellectual capacities and opportunities, but do not.

Why? Because the stakes are extraordinarily high. Ideas, values, rational thought, intellectual investigation, evidence — these determine both our individual and communal wellbeing. The Rabbis debate what is more important, study or deeds. They conclude that study is more important, because it leads to deeds. Deeds might be the most important outcome, but we cannot get there without learning. Ideas precede action as lightning precedes thunder. First, the bolt of thought, only then, the rumble of action. Philosophy determines policy. The better our ideas, the better our deeds. The more just our ideas, the more just our deeds.

“La’assok be’Torah” — “to immerse in Torah” is not just to pick up a book, not that there is anything wrong with that! In Judaism, there is a specific way to learn. The Sages meant a method of investigation driven by reason, debate, argument, persuasion, logic, evidence and proof.

The assumption that no one person, one group, one political party, one class, one association, one professor, one rabbi has a monopoly on truth is at the center of Judaism. The Jewish way, taught and retaught for thousands of years, is that we grow, we get smarter, we improve, by learning from, and interacting with, those who are different. Jewish tradition celebrates when people debate in good faith — when they differ with each other in pursuit of a greater truth.

“Kol machloket she’hi le’shem shamayim sofa le’hitkayem,” the Sages teach: “Every disagreement that is for the sake of heaven” — in pursuit of understanding — “is destined to endure.” Jews do not avoid debate. We actively seek it out. We do not take offense if you disagree. To the contrary, we are offended if you too-readily agree. There is a remarkable intellectual humility at the heart of Judaism: an acknowledgement that without you, I cannot learn. Without me, you cannot understand. We need each other.

This classically Jewish approach to learning is also the fundamental assumption of Western liberalism. It is one reason that Jews do well in free societies. Free inquiry, free expression, the ability to freely research and promote a broad spectrum of opinions is at the center of the Western tradition. Medieval authorities persecuted Galileo. The Enlightenment celebrated scientific inquiry, even if it conflicted with religion or angered powerful establishments. It is extraordinarily gratifying to me that our tradition practiced and preached intellectual pluralism from the beginning, and that our own sages preceded the giants of the liberal enlightenment by thousands of years.

Judaism is emphatic. Persuasion, vigorous challenge, openness to debate, a willingness to reconsider when new evidence emerges — these are the tools of the intellectual trade, and the prerequisites for social progress and communal decency. Reflexive dismissal of another opinion insults us. “Who is wise?” Ben Zoma asked. “One who learns from all people.”

Jews argue over everything. Our sacred texts explode with disagreements. You can hardly open even one page of Talmud without encountering numerous debates over seemingly minor matters.

The Talmud records 316 separate disputes between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. Jewish tradition eventually resolved most of them in favor of Hillel. The Talmud explains on what basis do we prefer one view over another. “The law follows the rulings of the school of Hillel because they were modest. They studied not only their own rulings, but those of Shammai as well. The school of Hillel was so humble that they mentioned the rulings of their opponents before their own.” They were eager to contemplate and analyze the other side’s opinions. They knew that doing so would strengthen their own ideas.

So, if, in most cases, Hillel’s approach prevailed, why even record Shammai’s views?

First, as an example: if the greatest of the great sages were open to counter arguments, you, too, should keep an open mind. Do not think that you are always right. Maybe someone else has something to teach you.

Second, Shammai’s views were preserved to leave room for future generations to make up their own minds. No solution is good for all times. Every problem lends itself to additional problems that require

fresh thinking. If we preserve minority views, future generations will learn from them, and perhaps even accept some of them.

Third: to demonstrate how we can argue with each other and remain united. We can have unity without uniformity. Only the insecure are afraid of challenge. To paraphrase Churchill: A little mouse of disagreement crawls into the room, and even the mightiest potentates are thrown into panic. They are afraid of the workings of the human mind.

The traditional Jewish approach to learning, investigation and ideas is this: Do you recognize that the other side also has something to say? Is your mind open to reason and persuasion? Do you pursue principle or power; are your disputes for the sake of heaven or personal ambition? Are you interested in unity — in preserving the integrity of society? Do you pursue the common good? Or are you busy delegitimizing the other side?

God weeps for those who have the potential *“la’assok be’Torah”* — to engage in this kind of study — but do not. Institutions of learning, teachers, thought leaders, are critical to shaping communal character. When they no longer commit to, and insist upon, the liberal discipline, we are in trouble.

2. God weeps for those who are unable to engage in Torah and do.

Why would God weep for those who are unable to study, but make the effort, nonetheless? We should praise them for trying, since learning is so fundamental to human life.

One commentator explains that the Sages were not referring to those who do not have the intellectual capacities but still do their best to learn. For them, God weeps *“bechayah shel Simcha,”* tears of joy.

Rather, what the Sages meant was the type of people who are incapable of intellectual pluralism but study and teach, nonetheless. They populate the great academies of learning. Such people might be brilliant, but they are arrogant. They think they know everything. They consider you worthless, either a moron or hopelessly immoral. They cavalierly cancel and dismiss. They use their intelligence not as a tool of persuasion, but a cudgel of intimidation and capitulation.

One of the disputes between the schools of Hillel and Shammai lasted for three years. Back and forth they went: arguments and counter-arguments. Finally, a heavenly voice descended to the earth, proclaiming, *“elu ve’elu divrei Elohim Chayim”* — “these and these are both the words of the living God.”

It is a *“machloket le’shem shamayim”* — a debate for the sake of heaven, the pursuit of understanding and truth. Even if only one opinion is eventually accepted, both reflect the words of the living God because both sides were sincere, honest, open, tolerant and intellectually pluralistic.

Imagine in our contemporary culture wars — that a partisan from one side would concede that the arguments of the other side have merit. You would lose your place in the tribe. Social media would excommunicate you. Your peers would turn on you. If you were in an academic institution, or a newspaper, they might seek to remove you, fire you, or force you to confess transgression: the 21st-century version of the Church’s inquisition of Galileo.

God weeps for these people. They are dangerous. There is coercion in their character, domination in their disposition.

Jewish lore describes the last two Jews in a small village. They hated each other, and bickered constantly. Eventually one of the two died. When the survivor was asked how it felt to be the last Jew in the village, he responded: "Finally I can run the community as I want."

We must be careful of those who want to run the community as they, and they alone, want — who tell us with certainty that they have discovered the answer to everything. There is something fearful about them. They simmer with the flames of hubris, and boil with the heat of certainty that liquefies reason. Even the most brilliant of us see the world only in fragments. People prone to all-inclusive theories are not usually in search of truth; they are in search of themselves.

For this reason, Judaism warns us not to vest too much power in one centralized authority. The biblical Tower of Conformity came crashing down. God scattered the people of Babel, instilling different languages and customs. It is a cautionary tale. God does not want uniformity. God wants a cacophony of voices: babble. God wants diversity. Freedom cannot long endure without the free exchange of ideas. The liberal task is to expand freedom. Build a tower of oppressive censorship, whether imposed from the outside or self-imposed, and freedom will eventually collapse. "If liberty means anything at all," wrote George Orwell, "it is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

Somewhere inside all of us, there is the instinct to dominate and the urge for power. Therefore, we must take great care to temper the reflex to dismiss, cancel, excommunicate, subjugate, intimidate, especially in institutions devoted to free thought — bastions of the liberal order — like schools, universities, newspapers, publishing houses, the arts — theater, film and culture.

We should revel in our differences, arguing loudly with each other how best to live. Diversity is a good thing, the lifeblood of liberty. The knee-jerk readiness to censor and cancel leads to authoritarianism. There is only one authority, one politically correct speech, one acceptable language. We know where this leads. We have seen it before. We lived it before — in the horrors of ideologies that were convinced that they and they alone, discovered the one solution to all of the world's problems. They are about the search for power more than the search for truth: "One ring to rule them all, one ring to find them. One ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them. In the Land of Mordor, where the shadows lie."

All absolutisms are dangerous, whether from the right or the left. They come from the same dark place in the human soul, where the shadows lie. All extremisms are a threat. An extremist mindset ultimately destroys that which it seeks to uphold.

"To be ultra is to go beyond," wrote Victor Hugo. "It is to attack the scepter in the name of the throne. It is to maltreat the thing you support. It is to be the partisan of things of the point of becoming their enemy: It is to be so very pro, that you are con."

It would be a boring world, and a primitive one, if we all marched in lockstep with each other, and agreed with each other all the time.

There are, of course, limits. Nothing is limitless in human affairs. Only God is without limits. Some views are beyond the pale. I will not dignify anti-Semitism or racial supremacy, simply because you assert it. But the increasing tendency in 21st-century America to affirm one acceptable answer, one legitimate view, is profoundly illiberal, even if it comes from the Left.

“Come, let us reason together,” Isaiah urges. Freedom is messy. Healthy societies are full of noise. I remember my visits to the Former Soviet Union immediately after the dissolution. There was a strange, eerie quiet on the streets. It was palpable. Suppression is quiet. Freedom is turbulent.

Avoid the temptation to diminish, devalue, or disgrace those who disagree with you. It is not the Jewish way. While the articulation of principle may be straightforward, implementation is always complicated, confounding and complex. Do not assume that those who differ with you on how to reduce poverty, how to preserve and extend civil rights, how to establish the most effective police force — do not assume that those who disagree with you are manifestly and morally malignant, indisputably and incontrovertibly ignorant, or parsimoniously privileged and prejudiced.

Fundamentalisms flourish in both religious and secular settings. Some now argue, with a straight face, that the Enlightenment itself — liberalism itself — science, reason, logic are constructs imposed on the world by white, European, colonial, patriarchal and racist societies in order to subjugate others. When intellectuals voice ideas that strike you as bizarre, they are the whacky ones, not you. As Clive James wrote: When scholarship, academia and language get beyond shouting distance of ordinary speech and ideas, voodoo is all it is.

I am a liberal. Liberalism is progressive by nature. We believe in change. We believe in persuasion. We believe in reason. We believe that society can improve — “*tikkun olam*,” social repair. We are not hopeless and we are not helpless. Generation after generation, brick by brick, we continue to build a more perfect union.

There is a troubling temperament in some elements of the contemporary Left that we have seen before. They have lost faith in persuasion, consensus and consent. They believe in breaking things. We must smash, obliterate the system, in order to construct a new society. The existing system is beyond repair. That is why parts of the new Left are so opposed to Israel. They view the Jewish State through the prism of race and white privilege — never mind that they are completely ignorant of the fact that most Israeli Jews are what we would call today “Jews of color.” They are not white. They are Semitic, Middle Eastern. And never mind that the descendants of most Israeli Jews were so unprivileged that they fled to Israel, penniless refugees, victims of vicious racism in Europe and harsh oppression by fellow Semites in the Middle East.

Do not give in. Do not be intimidated. Fundamentalists, religious and secular, assume that the other side is vapid, filled with unbelievers. They wrap themselves in garments of virtue while presuming that everyone else is morally naked, stripped of values. They clothe themselves in vanity, not virtue, a kind of pubescent self-righteousness. I do not doubt the sincerity, conviction or sense of duty of parts of the new Left. But these are qualities that, when misguided, become odious.

Stand up for yourselves. Kneel before no one. Defy those who demand obedience on pain of excommunication. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.

3. God weeps for leaders who lord it over the community

What do arrogant leaders have to do with the other Talmudic categories?

When those who are uniquely suited to guide intellectual progress do not; and when those who are not suited to guide intellectual progress, do — what you end up with is arrogant, shallow leaders, who lord it over the community.

Leaders reflect the people. They do not simply pop up out of the blue. They are not aberrations. They emerge from us, from our culture, from our education, from our politics. “As the generation, so the leader,” the Talmud teaches.

The Hebrew word the Sages use is *“mitga’eh.”* It implies not only arrogance, but false pride: those who puff out their chests, convinced that they are above everyone else. They think they know more than they do. “I alone can fix it,” they say. “I know more than the doctors. I know more than the generals. I am a stable genius. I recruit the best people. I am the only thing standing between the American dream and total anarchy, madness and chaos.”

They don’t just say these things for political reasons. They sincerely believe them. And because they don’t know that they don’t know, they are dangerous.

God weeps not only for the individual leader, but for the community led by such individuals.

Good leaders do something religious in nature. They appeal to our better angels. They know that human beings emerged from the jungle, and that we are always on the cusp of relapse. Wise leaders understand that it does not take much to stimulate our primitive animalistic instincts. And so stimulated, we are capable of a depravity that no other creature on earth can imagine. The lion tears the zebra to shreds for food. It would never occur to it to waterboard its prey, to shackle it in chains of bondage because of the color of the stripes on its skin, to gas millions of them in the name of the master race of lions.

Good leaders seek to elevate us beyond our narrow self-interest, and bind us to a higher cause. They know that it is much easier to destroy unity than to build it. “‘Tis easy dropping stones in wells, but who shall get them out,” wrote George Elliott.

Jeremiah lamented: *“Hoy ro’im me’abdim u’mefitzim et tzon mar’i’ti”* — “Woe unto the shepherds who let My flock stray and scatter. It is you – the shepherds – the leaders – the ones who should know better – it is you - who lost the sheep and drove My flock away.”

We brought our leadership on ourselves. We have so devalued science, evidence, logic, facts. We are so intolerant, so dismissive, so eager to cancel the other that tens of millions of Americans have lost their way. They are unmoored. From both the right and the left, we mock expertise and dismiss science. There are as many anti-vaxxers on the left as the right. Where did we learn that? In school, university, social media?

There are as many conspiracy theorists on the left as on the right. For every right-wing bigot convinced that Jews conspire to control the world, so there are left-wing bigots convinced that Zionists conspire to control the world. For every right-wing radical who boycotts Jewish-owned businesses, so there are left-wing radicals who boycott Israeli-owned businesses. For every right-wing campus agitator canceling Jews from leadership, so there are left-wing campus agitators canceling Jews from leadership. In fact, on campus, canceling Jewish students is probably more prevalent on the left than on the right.

Philosophically, these groups may be miles apart, but they share the same intolerant, turbulent, tempestuous temperament. And it often leads them to the same dark place. The outer edges of the Left and the Right fold into each other. They end up with the same hatred of Jews.

So many, from both the right and the left, no longer seek truth and understanding. They seek acceptance, a safe place in the tribe, a shelter from the harshness of the world outside. If the leader of the tribe tells us that we can kill the coronavirus by ingesting Drano, millions listen. What they hear is the doctor knows nothing. The medicine man will cure.

A country that hauled the world into the 20th century, saved Europe twice, defeated fascism, imperialism and communism; a great nation, an exceptional nation that practically invented modern technology, cured disease, landed humans on the moon. America: first in science, first in research, first in public health, first in technological innovation. How did we become an America First nation?

The state of American politics today is the result of year after year, decade after decade, of intellectual and political neglect. It did not happen overnight.

Hosea warned:

“Ki ruach yizra’u ve’sufata yiktzoru” — they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.

For years we have sown the seeds of intolerance. We have allowed the foundations of liberal democracy to crumble. And now, the gathering storm.

Emily Dickenson wrote:

“Crumbling is not an instant's Act

A fundamental pause

Dilapidation's processes

Are organized Decays —

‘Tis first a Cobweb on the Soul

A Cuticle of Dust

A Borer in the Axis

An Elemental Rust —

Ruin is formal — Devil's work

Consecutive and slow —

Fail in an instant, no man did

Slipping — is Crashe's law —”

We have been slipping for years. Organized decays, consecutive and slow, cobwebs on the American soul. Sadly, we are paying the price of failing to clear the cuticles of dust and the elemental rust. We can change America. We can reverse its slow decay. But we must be willing to fight for what is right. If we do not summon the resolve, God will weep, and we, too, will cry for the beloved country. We must be willing to stand up to intimidation from wherever it comes. We must be willing to fight for our principles. We must reject extremism on all sides. We must be willing to vote. We must be willing to engage, and to keep at it year after year. As crumbling is not an instant’s act, so rejuvenation is not immediate.

Do not lose hope. *“Va’hakimoti aleihem ro’im,”* promised Jeremiah: “Good shepherds will arise again.” They shall tend to the flock with compassion and care. The lost sheep shall return. None shall be missing.

Keep the faith. The American dream is alive. It is still alive. The torch of liberty will pierce the shadows. We will “find the dark grown luminous, the void fruitful.”

We can do it. America is capable of miraculous regeneration. It is not too late. It is never too late for America. We can change.

Franz Kafka wrote a haunting short story entitled, “A Little Fable.” It is one paragraph long, so I will conclude my remarks by reading it in full: “‘Alas,’ said the mouse, ‘the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning, it was so big that I was afraid. I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into.’

“‘You only need to change your direction,’ said the cat, and ate it up.”