

“The Danger of Certainty”
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Shanah Tovah,

There is an old joke about the synagogue where they couldn't agree about how to say the Shema. Half the members said that the tradition was to stand when saying the Shema. The other half said the tradition was to remain seated.

They argued like mad. Finally, someone suggested they send a delegation to Florida to ask one of the founding members of the synagogue what the tradition was? Do you stand or do you sit?

When the delegation arrived, they asked: “was the tradition of the synagogue to stand during the Shema?”

“That wasn't the tradition.”

“Ahh, so you used to sit during the Shema!”

“That wasn't the tradition.”

“We are arguing like cats and dogs; there's no peace, please: we need to know, what was the tradition of the synagogue?”

“You are fighting like cats and dogs and there is no peace! That was the tradition!”

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Arguing over tradition is a “Jewish sport.” Disagreements over what Jews are supposed to do have been a part of our hallowed tradition. The beauty is this: no matter how much we disagree, we have always stayed together.

That is why I am worried about a dangerous trend that we have witnessed over the past few months. Disagreements within our community and vilification of each other is now threatening to tear us apart.

And this has not been confined to the Jewish people. There has been, in our country, a disagreement over what to do about a country in the Middle East that is not Israel. Of course, I am talking about Iran. This is a very serious issue, to us as Jews and to every American for Iran is not just an enemy of Israel, it is an enemy of the United States.

If Iran develops nuclear weapons it threatens not only Israel, but also the United States, and the balance of power in the entire Middle East.

Over the past few months Americans have been deeply divided about the agreement to curtail Iran's nuclear program. Those who disagreed with it, and I am one of them, said the agreement was not strong enough. Those who agreed said it was the best deal that could be achieved and it will effectively stop Iran for at least 15 years.

The plan, called: "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" was negotiated by the 5 Permanent Members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (the P5 + 1) the European Union, and Iran. The plan has now cleared Congress. It has enough support and it cannot be blocked.

Let me tell you why I opposed the deal. I don't think it is wise to be conciliatory to our enemies, especially Iran which continues to threaten to destroy us. We Jews know that when someone threatens to destroy you, you take them at their word. You don't make agreements that might allow them to get the means to do, in the future, what they are pledging to do in the present. I honestly don't think that any agreement with Iran would have been strong enough but this one is not strong enough. That is why I went to Washington this summer to lobby against it.

Yet, now that it has passed, it is time for us to reconsider our strategy. One thing continues to deeply trouble me, and that is the way this disagreement has caused a deep divide among Jews.

While I had grave concerns over this deal, I refused from day one to characterize those who disagreed with me as evil, to call them traitors, or label them as un-American.

Yet that is precisely what has happened over the last few months.

Senator Charles Schumer, Democrat of New York, was against the deal. He was attacked by his fellow Democrats. His patriotism was called into question. They suggested that he cares more about Israel than the United States. His dedication was called into question and some argued that he was not fit for leadership in the Democratic Party.

On the other side was Congressman Jerome Nadler, Democrat of New York. He came out in support of the Iran deal. He was attacked by some Orthodox Jewish groups and accused of being a traitor, betraying Israel, endangering its existence, and he was likened to a Nazi collaborator.

Right now, what our community needs is healing. We Jews have disagreed passionately with each other before, but never have we allowed those disagreements to spill over into the mainstream. We have kept our disagreements to ourselves, and not allowed them to become partisan political issues. We have never made support for, or opposition to, any issue into a litmus test of loyalty or called each other “traitors.”

What is truly astounding in all of this is that you would have thought that the disagreement was over whether or not to make peace with Iran, with those in favor saying “lift the sanctions,” and those opposed saying “keep the sanctions going.”

But the truth is that everyone — both those in favor and those opposed — are in agreement that Iran is a significant threat. Everyone agrees: Iran can not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons. Everyone agrees: Iran cannot be trusted. Everyone agrees: Iran supports terrorism and will use it to destabilize the Middle East.

The disagreement is not over making peace with Iran, it over the best way to stop Iran.

Everyone agrees that it is dangerous for Iran to be able to split the atom, but what we don't realize is that there is a danger to letting Iran split us into warring camps. Now is the time for us to heal and to come together and to speak as one. Iran is the enemy, not those who disagree with us.

What concerns me most right now is not agreement with Iran, what concerns me most is the nature of the way we have been speaking to each other today, and not just about Iran. It crosses into every area of our lives. There is a danger, not in being passionate, but in believing, in our passion, that our way is the only way.

There is a danger to certainty: The danger of believing that we are completely right that everyone else is absolutely wrong. To counter that, we need to inject humility into our discourse.

There is a lack of humility in politics. There was a time when those on the right and the left, Republicans and Democrats, could disagree passionately and still work together.

There is a lack of humility in our universities. There was a time when academic freedom was respected, and universities were a place where ideas were shared, today, Boycott and Divestiture movements threaten to push Israeli professors and Jewish students out of our campuses, off student government, and onto the margins.

There was a time when people had the humility to act upon what they believed while still holding out the possibility that there might be other paths to the truth.

Humility is a key Jewish concept. It is a lesson that Abraham teaches God. God announces His intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah

Upon hearing God's plan, Abraham says: "Really, God, I know you are all about right and wrong, but perhaps there are 50 righteous people there? Will you destroy them, too?"

Abraham plants in God's mind an important question whenever we begin judging others. That question is "Perhaps?" Abraham teaches God that Justice must be served, not absolutely, but with humility.

Humility is central to Jewish law. Halachah acknowledges over and over again that there is not one path to the truth.

In the Talmud, the rabbis wonder why it is that in most cases where they disagree the views of the school of Rabbi Hillel are almost always the accepted over the views of Rabbi Shammai, his opponent. The answer: because Hillel and his students always include the teachings of Shammai and his students in their explanations. Hillel and his students taught with humility.

Once they disagreed over what to do about construction material that was stolen. The question was this: If someone stole a construction beam, and then used it to build a house, what should you do?

Shammai taught: *מקעקע כל הבירה כולה ומחזיר מריש לבעליו* "the whole house must be demolished and the beam must be restored to its owner."

Hillel taught: *אין לו אלא דמי מריש בלבד משום תקנת השבין* "the owner can claim only the value of the beam so as not to block the way for repentance" (Talmud Bavli, Gittin 55a).

The teaching is quite interesting, and it shows us so much about their different approaches to life. If you really want justice, then you must tear the house down and return the stolen beam to its owner.

Hillel teaches that we calculate the amount of the loss, and that amount is given to the original owner. If we insist on absolute justice, then no one will ever return stolen beams, and there will be no Teshuvah, no repentance.

Hillel's teaching applies to life, not just to stolen beams. We can insist that our way is "the way," but if we do that... if we insist on the absolute correctness of our view, then we will have no choice but to tear down "the house." If we want our homes, the homes we occupy with our family, the

synagogue, the “home” of the Jewish people, the houses of Congress, to stand, we can only do that if we balance justice with humility.¹

The Hebrew poet, Yehuda Amichai, wrote:

מן המקום שבו אנו צודקים
לא יצמחו לעולם פריחים באביב.
המקום שבו אנו צודקים
הוא רמוס וקשה כמו חצר.
אבל ספקות ואהבות עושים את העולם לתחור
כמו חפרפרת, כמו חריש.
ולחישה תשמע במקום שבו היה הבית
אשר נחרב.

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, like a plow. And a whisper will be
heard in the place where the ruined house once stood.

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There are places of certainty, of “right,” in this world, but in those places,
flowers do not grow. Flowers grow in places where there are love and
doubt, where there is compromise, and working together. It is time for us to
rebuild the ruined house of the Jewish people.

We need healing: in our country, in our homes and in the Jewish
community. The Iran deal has passed, but Iran remains a threat that won’t
overcome it by going to war with each other.

May this new year, 5776, be a year of goodness, love, compassion,
friendship, and, most of all: healing.

May it be, for you and me, for our neighbors, our children, our synagogue,
for the State of Israel, and for the United States of America, a year of
strength, healing, and blessing. Shana Tova!

¹ I learned this text, and the Amichai poem, in a Shiur at the Shalom Hartman Institute, Summer 2015, taught by Melila Hellner Eshed, “Saving the World from the Flames of Justice.”