

Rabbi Richard Agler
 Keys Jewish Community Center
 Tavernier, FL

September 30, 2017
 10 Tishrei, 5778
 Yom Kippur

Sacred Conversations—Making Peace

We began our post-hurricane High Holyday theme on Rosh Hashanah morning by looking at anger, and at how it can destroy families, communities and nations. In the time since, we've looked at how behaving more tribally and less universally can be just as harmful.

But we've also seen how it is possible to overcome our tribal impulses. By reaching out and crossing boundaries, by coming to know and respect neighbors who may belong to different tribes. Today we'll look at how our personal conversations, either within the tribe or across tribes, can take us to deeper understanding and greater peace.

When the topic is peace in the Jewish tradition, we often begin with Aaron, the brother of Moses. Because the Mishnah says we should be like the disciples of Aaron, who sought peace and pursued it. (*Avot 1:12*)

The Rabbis wondered about this. Since most everyone says they want peace, why makes Aaron so special? Aaron, we are told, realized that having the desire for peace was not enough. He went further, pursuing it and working to make it real. Aaron could break down barriers, defuse anger and assuage people's egos. (*Kalah Rabati 3:1; Midrash Shmuel, Avot 1:12*) We'll look at some of the ways he did during our learning session this afternoon. But here's an example of what he knew not to do.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. was once asked if he could say in one sentence what he learned from witnessing the Civil War. His answer: "Certitude leads to violence." We human beings love it when we are certain. And as our friend Will Rogers said, We get into trouble when what we think we know, just isn't so.

A few years ago I accompanied Mindy to one of her professional conferences. The keynote speaker was a therapist/comedian. (He was from California, what do you expect?) The central point of his talk, which he worked into a full blown shtick,

was “First Thought Wrong.”

He explained that when we are faced with a complicated or challenging situation, there’s a good chance that our first thought will be wrong, more of a reaction and less something that we’ve actually thought through.

Because of this it is more likely to be harmful than helpful.

He did a whole presentation on the theme and it was well done.

I think he went so far as to put the slogan on t-shirts and his business card: “First Thought Wrong.”

I’m not qualified to pass judgment on its therapeutic merit or lack thereof but I know from my own life, especially in complicated situations, my first thought is not often my best thought.

Most of the time it is instinctive, even tribal: fight or flight.

And I know I’m not the only one.

One of the great things about being a human being is that we have the ability to think second thoughts, and thirds and fourths; as many as we want to before we open our mouths.

The theory is that the process will get us to a better place.

But as we all know, it’s not as easy as it sounds.

At my previous synagogue we once contracted with a consultant to help us deal with we called “communications issues.”

Which sounds more professional than relationship issues which is what they really were.

He ran a successful company that did work around the globe.

And I was astonished when I figured out how simple his message was.

Basically, whenever we were facing an idea or position that we did not care for or agree with, instead of going with whatever our first thought might be, he wanted us to try to choke out, in whatever words we could manage: “Help me to understand.”

And to make that, if not our first thought, at least our first response.

When we could actually do it, it was an effective way to transition from potential confrontation to partnership.

Aaron would have been proud.

It can work outside of the workplace as well.

In communities, in families, in our personal lives, within tribes and especially across them.

“Help me to understand.”

Instead of exchanging polemics, it can generate a real conversation.

It may even lead to that most welcome of phrases, “Oh, I see what you mean.”

Which of course leads to a better relationship still.

It doesn't mean that we are changing our mind.

It does mean we are going forward without demonizing one another.
And that's no small thing.

Peace seeking behavior like this is not always being modeled for us.

All of us are navigating through a fair amount of strife these days.
It may be personal. It is definitely public.

Part of it, no doubt, is because in this age of instant communication,
it is way too easy to hit "send" and release
all those "first thoughts wrong" into the universe.

And, let's be honest, it's way more fun to do that than it is to have to
sit down and listen to someone explain to us
how we can better understand them.

Seriously, there is poison in our inboxes, on our Facebook and Twitter feeds,
on the websites we click and on the news shows we watch.

We spend so much time in that virtual world,
which becomes in essence our own personal tribe,
when we could be out in the real world,
growing and learning in real conversations with real people.

Some of the best exchanges I've had in recent years
have been with folks who do not see the world as I do,
but whose arguments were not reducible to
the talking points, or the shouting points,
that they assign to the chattering heads on television.

We rarely convince one another, which is fine.

But we increase our respect for one another, which is better than fine.
"Help me to understand." "I see what you mean." "First thought wrong."
They may not make for great ratings.
But they make for better conversations and better lives.

Controversy and disagreement have been a part of Jewish life,
and a part of human life, since the very beginning.

In the Torah, Cain quarrels with Abel and the people quarrel with Moses.
In the Talmud, there is ongoing disagreement between
the Rabbis of Beit Hillel and the Rabbis of Beit Shammai,
who were more or less the Democrats and Republicans of their day.

But they were evidently much better
at engaging one another constructively and avoiding acrimony
than those two parties are today.

The good news is that they've told us how to do it.

The only question is if we are smart enough to learn from them.

Once, after an exhaustive debate, instead of calling the question,
Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai decided to submit it to a higher authority.

They turned to the heavens and a *bat kol*—a divine voice, answered them.

(Wouldn't it be nice if we could do that today?)

The *bat kol* said,

"Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim Chayim—

These and these are the words of the living God."

In other words, you are both correct.

Okay, that's nice but now what are we supposed to do? What's the decision?

The *bat kol* answered, "The *halacha*—the law, is according to Beit Hillel."

(*Eruvin* 13b)

Also nice, but why?

If they are both correct, how come the law goes according to Beit Hillel?

The first reason is that they were in the majority.

Which itself tells us something interesting.

If Beit Hillel were in the majority,

why did they agree to ask the *bat kol* in the first place?

They could have just as soon called for a vote and won

without risking the possibility that the *bat kol* might rule differently.

But they agreed to it because it was more important

that the decision be right, than that they win.

Never mind "first thought wrong."

They were willing to accept that their 120th thought might have been wrong!

Getting it right, not just for their tribe but for everyone, came first.

I don't know if any of our lawmakers would do the same today but no matter.

We can do this in our personal and community lives.

Instead of being determined to win an argument at whatever cost

we can agree to a solution that is the best for the most.

That may not sound especially radical but we all know people

who are willing to go down in flames and take everyone else with them,

rather than admit that their way might not be the best way.

The Talmud gives other reasons why Beit Hillel prevailed.

One is that they were "kindly and modest."

We could tell that from the story of the *bat kol*.

They showed none of the arrogance that often accompanies power.

If they were wrong,

they were willing to be told so and would have accepted it graciously.

We are also told that they studied Beit Shammai's arguments.

In other words, they didn't, as we might say today,

stay in their own echo chamber.

They examined, really examined, their opponents' point of view.

They didn't just memorize their own talking points and

come up with snappy sound bites for responses.

In other words they were about "Help me to understand,"

because understanding is what mattered most.

Finally, during formal debate,
 Beit Hillel would repeat Beit Shammai's arguments
 before stating their own.
 Which showed that they were not going to try to talk past their opponents.
 They were not going to ignore what they said and
 spin some irrelevant alternate narrative.
 They were not going to speak *ad hominem* or make personal insults,
 they were going to engage the issue and stay on point.

Again, we could do worse than see these practices adopted
 by our own lawmakers.
 But if that seems out of reach, we can still make use of them personally.
 By showing consideration and modesty in every interaction.
 By being willing to accept that we might be wrong.
 By looking always for different understanding.
 And by not throwing our weight around, just because we can.

There's something else we should know about B. Hillel and B. Shammai.
 Even though their disagreements were philosophical, religious and serious,
 they did not allow them to poison societal relationships,
 neither theirs nor anyone else's.
 They disagreed on whether certain foods were permitted or forbidden,
 but they would still eat in one another's homes.
 They even disagreed on questions of marital and personal status,
 which include whether someone is legitimately divorced or not,
 and also whether someone is legitimately Jewish or not.
 No matter: the families of Beit Hillel still married
 into the families of Beit Shammai
 and the families of Beit Shammai still married into the families of Beit Hillel.
 At the end of the day preserving relationships and the unity of the community
 were more important than their personal opinions,
 however strongly they held them. (Tosefta Yevamot 1:11; BT Yevamot 14b)

We know that so often today, intellectual and
 especially political disagreements, do lead to loss of relationship.
 The Rabbis are trying to telling us, if this is what is happening,
 we are doing it wrong.
 If a relationship is worth having, it is worth preserving,
 even in the face of differences.
 This might not be a bad step towards *tshuvah* for all of us in the New Year.

Sacred conversations are not always about overcoming differences.
 But they are always about finding
 our irreducible and shared humanity.

During the summer I paid a visit to a friend who is fighting brain cancer.

It was a challenging visit.

He is most learned but

now struggles to remember many of the great things he knows;

he was eloquent but his words now come out with difficulty;

he once moved with great grace, and now depends on

equipment and apparatus to complete the most basic tasks.

It is a nasty disease.

He and his wife are assisted at home by a health aide whom I will call Steven.

Steven is a young man, African-African, and during my visit it was obvious that he is as devoted as one can be to this difficult job.

As the visit ended and I prepared to leave the house,

Steven walked me to the door.

I thanked him for that and may have gone on for a couple of sentences expressing my gratitude for caring for my friend. Done.

A few weeks later, my friend's father passed away and

I called to offer condolences.

He was napping at the time and his wife picked up the phone.

We exchanged the words that one does on such occasions and as

we were about to say goodbye she said she had something to tell me.

After my earlier visit, Steven came to her and said words to the effect

that of all the people who had visited their house since my friend took ill,

I was the only one who expressed thanks to him.

She went on to tell me that I was a special person.

While on one level that was nice to hear, honestly, I felt horrible.

Of all the people who have been to that house to visit,

only one could say thank you to the caregiver?

To the one who is doing more than any of the rest of us

to keep our friend together, certainly in body and possibly in soul?

And I can only tell this story because I have some idea of the number of times

that I could have extended myself to do something just as meaningful and

just as simple but didn't.

There's no excuse but I wonder nonetheless. Maybe some of it is a matter of tribe.

White/black, Jewish/not, work with head/work with hands, employer/employee...I

don't know. Whatever the answer is, it's not a good one.

Whatever it is that keeps us from showing simple decency towards our fellow human beings, whatever tribe or tribes they may belong to, we need to find ways to get over it, and past it. Before it tears us any further apart than it already has.

This is from a poem by Ruth Brin:

**No one ever told me the coming of the Messiah
Could be an inward thing.
No one ever told me a change of heart
Might be as quiet as new fallen snow.
No one ever told me that redemption
Was as simple as springtime...**

**No one ever told me that salvation
Might be like a fresh spring wind...**

**What I found for myself I try to tell you:
Redemption and salvation are very near,
And the taste of them is in the world
That God created and laid before us.
(*Mishkan Hanefesh, RH, p. 81*)**

***G'mar chatimah tovah*—may we each find ways to be sealed for goodness in the new year.**