

I was sitting in a conference room at the Knesset building in Jerusalem this summer. The conference table was surrounded by rabbis from across the country waiting to hear about the future of progress, a vision for peace and security, not just one while neglecting the other. It was there that we met with members of the Government on the left and on the right. They were very careful to schedule these meetings so that they never overlapped, so the politicians never bumped into each other. In fact, there was even a break in between so that they wouldn't have to pass each other in the hall. But like most Jewish groups, we were running behind schedule. And like most politicians, they were also running behind schedule.

We were chatting with Meirav Michaeli, one of the leading liberal voices of the left-wing Labor party, well past the scheduled and allotted time when the conference room door swung open and in walked Yehudah Glick, the right-wing Likud member and rabbi who is overly obsessed with access to the Temple Mount. They intentionally planned the schedule to avoid awkward moments like this, to avoid two opposing leaders going at each other. And now we were witnesses to what we all anticipated would happen next: two people with completely different views yelling, screaming, and fighting.

We waited. And waited. Except that never happened. The oddest thing happened: they exchanged pleasantries. They talked and joked. Michaeli called Glick a mensch, and they spent time talking about all that they agree on and the issues that they work together to accomplish. Rabbi Glick smiled at us, seeing our shock, and simply said that it is easy to disagree and yell at each other. It is easy to refuse to talk to the other. He mentioned to me that this is what Teshuvah is for. Teshuvah is not just to admit our transgressions, but to change, to reach out to the other instead of ridiculing the other. Now maybe he knew he was speaking to a room full of rabbis thinking about what message they would share with their communities on the High Holidays. But his words stayed with me.

I'm not sure what shocked us. Was it that these two politicians were on opposing poles, opposing sides of the political spectrum? Or was it that we live in a country that is so divided, a country in which we are so disgusted with anyone who has an opposing view? Is it that we live in a country where candidates refer to opponents with often offensive nicknames? Is it that we have come to expect our leaders to hate each other because of their differences, so we are thrown off when we see two people get along, despite their differences?

Last week, the *New York Times* ran an article about the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. President and First Lady George W and Laura Bush and President Barack and Michelle Obama were there together, and were caught on camera – *God forbid* – laughing, hugging, and embracing. The Times captured the photo and wrote that the Bush-Obama rapport recalls a lost virtue: that of Political Civility.

In a month, our country will head to the voting booth on Election Day. This is a sacred rite and ritual, a responsibility that many have literally giving their lives for, a responsibility not to take lightly. This is a responsibility with which Judaism teaches we should involve ourselves as we are taught *al Tifros min haTzibur*, don't separate yourself from the rest of the community. This

is an experience in which the voting booth is as sacred as our sanctuaries. In fact, the Rabbinical Assembly joined with other movements and denominations in helping individuals register to vote, understanding the importance of participating in this sacred act. And yet, this election season and campaign has turned voting into the opposite of sacred; the campaign has become a chillul Hashem, a desecration of God. Because instead of focusing on policy where there is merit to disagree, the campaign has focused on personality. Politicians are to blame, but we are to blame. This is not a campaign where you see -- like I did in Israel -- two political opponents talking casually about what they agree upon. This campaign season has been fueled by hate.

And just as the biblical prophets raged against hate and injustice, we must too. Candidates met this past week at Hofstra University for the first presidential debate. Before the debate, CBS News reported that a "Stop the Hate" rally was organized at the university, at the sight of the debate, hours before the candidates were set to square off. One of the attendees, Gary Gilbert, was quoted by media as saying that he attended because "I think America is better than that. America is not hate. America was built on dedication, integrity, love, the better things, and that's why I'm here, because I think most people are basically good." Maybe it is the campaign season that has caused this. Maybe it is the campaign season that has brought out the worst in people. Or maybe it was the campaign that gave an avenue and excuse to further divide us as humanity, to single out the other who is different, to make sure that those who think differently no longer sit at the table together.

We come together on Rosh Hashanah to write a new chapter, to begin again, to begin anew. We celebrate and sing: *Hayom Harat Olam*, that today is the Birthday of the world, not just acknowledging a theological idea that God created the world. Rather, it's a belief that today the world is created anew. Today is our opportunity to create a new world and build a world without hate.

The Psalmist teaches (89:3) - *Olam Chesed Yibaneh*. While the commentator Rashi understands Olam to mean "ad Olam," forever, and understands this to mean that God will forever build kindness, the simple translation is just as impactful on this birthday of the world- *Olam Chesed Yibaneh*, that we build a world full of kindness. A promise to build this world in kindness. The Malbim explains that from the beginning, the world was created with kindness and kindness alone. But humanity changed that. So if we are to recreate the world, and renew it on this day of the world's birth, then we must begin with kindness.

In response to the Syrian Refugee crisis, a young six-year-old named Alex from Westchester, decided to write a letter to the President after seeing Omran Daqneesh covered in blood and debris, after being rescued from the rumble of Aleppo weeks ago. Local news reported on the letter he sent to the White House, saying, "that Omran could come live with him and his family." He said, "since he won't bring toys, I will share my bike. I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him addition and subtraction. My little sister will collect butterflies and fireflies for him. We can all play together. We will give him a family and he can be our brother." We can disagree about how to deal with the Refugee crisis. That's not why I read this letter. I read this letter reflecting on how such a young boy, who has only lived on this earth for six years, is filled

with such kindness in his heart that he is proudly declaring his willingness to adopt a stranger as his brother, kindness because he is focused on loving the other instead of hating the other. That is from a child. Meanwhile, as adults, we are focused on hating the other, hating those who have a different opinion than us, and even hating those who look different, pray differently, love differently, and identify differently than us.

Facebook, the world of social media, where we seem to spend more of our time than the actual world, only adds to that. Facebook's algorithm, attempts to only have statuses, pictures, videos, and articles appear on our newsfeeds that it thinks we will agree with. We unfollow the opinions that are different than our own. We rely on an echo chamber where our words of love can reverberate, but our words of hate can reverberate as well.

The Talmud is specific when it talks about a difference of opinions, a difference of beliefs, and a difference of halachic interpretations, the modern day equivalent of a difference in policy. In *Mesechet Eruvin 13b*, we read about the common arguments between the students of Hillel and the students of Shammai who would always disagree. It's there we read the well-known phrase *Elu v'Elu Divrei Elohim Chaim*. When referring to the disagreement between Hillel's opinions and Shammai's opinions, the Talmud says that a Heavenly angelic voice, a *bat kol*, shouts from the Heavens that this opinion and this opinion, that both opinions, are divine; both are words of the living God. It continues though that the Halacha sides with the teachings of Hillel. How then, the Talmud asks, if an angelic voice declares the divine nature of diverse opinions, can it side with one over the other? The answer is simple. It's not because the students of Hillel were more knowledgeable. It's not because they were more scholarly. The Talmud says that it sides with Hillel because of his values. The students of Hillel were kind and gracious. They taught their own ideas as well as the ideas from the students of Shammai. Not only for this reason, but they went so far as to teach Shammai's opinions first. They were modest and humble and kind. They didn't hate the other, or hate on the other, because of differences. Rather, they respected the other specifically because of those differences.

We often forget that when we teach this text. We use it to teach that all opinions are equally divine, sacred, and the word of God. But that is not what this says at all. What the Talmud is saying is that we must side with kindness. We must side with love. We must side with a concern for others, rather than a ridiculing of others as "other."

I am sure many of you are counting down the days until the campaign season comes to an end just as I am, counting down until the conclusion of such hateful rhetoric. But that is assuming that this election is responsible for hate. Of course that is not true. Instead it has stoked the flames of hate, giving it permission to spread. Hate will continue long after the election, unless we are prepared to change our lives, and change the world. At Congregation Beth El, we pride ourselves on being a Big Tent. We are a member of Big Tent Judaism's Coalition of Inclusive Congregations and are committed to ensuring that there is a place for everyone here. But as we begin the new year, we must stand up and say that no place in the tents that we build, in the tent of this congregation, in our homes, or our communities, for hate. There is no room in this tent for hatred of another.

I worry about the uptick in hate in the world, in this country, in the political arena, in our community. And I am scared. The irony is that this is a moment when we should be scared. Our tradition teaches that this new year is more than just a moment of joy; more than just a sweet new beginning. This is a moment of fear, of awe. Standing before God during this season of amazement, there is there is also fear. And we are scared. And yet, the authentically Jewish belief that we are all sacred *is* what makes us scared. I am scared and I am heartbroken - heartbroken that we celebrate the birthday of a world that is so broken, living in a society that is so divisive. And scared.

But we also have an opportunity, a responsibility, an obligation, in the year to come. Our responsibility is to make this world better than it was when we entered this world, to make this world a more loving place. The Talmud says in *Mesechet Bava Metzi'a 37b* that silence is tantamount to consent. To remain silent when others say something hateful is to condone such hate. We are actually told to do more than just refuse to stay silent. We are commanded to rebuke hate.

Leviticus 19:17 tells us "Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor so that their sin won't be your sin." We tend to look at the positive nature of Hillel's teaching to love thy neighbor, as thyself. But this is asking us to do something completely different. We are being told to not hate another. A command to love and a command to not hate are not the same. And yet, we are supposed to do both. Our command to not hate is telling us to not just avoid hate, but to call out hate. This isn't referring to violence. To say we must not hate in our heart refers to the hate within, the senseless hatred of another.

And interestingly, it seems that the rabbis of the Talmud (*Arachin 16b*), understand the divisive and hateful nature of this campaign season. Rabbi Tarfon taught: "I'd be surprised if anyone in this generation can take rebuke. You tell a person to take a stick out of their mouth and they'll tell you to take a board between your eyes." Rabbi Eliezer Ben Azarya add that he'd be surprised if anyone even knew how to properly criticize another. And Rabbi Yochanan Ben Nuri said that "I swear when Rabbi Akiva and I were before the great Rabbi Gamliel, we would accuse him of something and even then, he would shower us with love."

We see senseless hatred spewed towards another and we respond with hatred towards the hater. Others in turn respond with hatred towards us. We tell someone that something is wrong and they respond with something worse. We may call out hate and then we become the victims of hate, or in many cases, we become the perpetrators of hate. We must call out hatred, but strive to rise above such divisive hatred, or as Yochanan Ben Nuri said, act like Gamliel and shower others with love when they rebuke.

I keep returning to the words of Glick, the right-wing rabbi and politician in Israel. We do Teshuvah. And that is how we rid ourselves of that hate. Teshuvah is about more than just saying sorry, more than just admitting our mistakes. It is about returning to a different time, a different moment. This means acknowledging the hate that we all spread, even when we think

we aren't, hate that we spread even without realizing it, the subconscious bigotry that may drive our opinions. Teshuvah is about more than just acknowledging our faults and mistakes. Teshuvah is about returning to a previous state. Teshuvah is about being found after feeling lost. Once we acknowledge that we are all lost, that society is lost, then we can be found, then we can finally return.

We mourn on the fast day of Tisha B'Av, and are told that senseless hatred led to destruction of community, of society. We reflect on that senseless hatred then by chanting the words of Lamentations. The words of Lamentations are also words that we cry out during the Selichot services, and words we call out as we cling to our Torah scrolls, words that we recite as we attempt to redeem ourselves, and redeem our souls, words that we recite as we do a true accounting of our souls, words that we recite as we strive to rid ourselves of any hate that we feel, in order to rid this world of hate as well.

*Hashiveinu Adonai Elecha v'Nashuva Chadesh Yameinu K'Kedem.*  
Return us God to you and Renew our days as of old.

Return us God to you - to love instead of hate, to a world that is whole, to a world that is renewed, to a world in which we can respectfully disagree instead of attacking each other over those disagreements. Return us to a time when our leaders lead through love instead of hate, when our leaders talk more about what they believe instead of simply what was wrong with the other. And return each of us to a time when we have loves in our hearts, when we loves the other. Return us to a time where we do not hate our brothers and sisters, but love our neighbors. And Renew us as in days of old. Renew us so that those who disagree can sit down at the table together. Renew us so that those who disagree can still greet each other, and love each other.

During the *U'netaneh Tokef* prayer which we will soon recite, we say these words: *Uteshuva, u'tefillah, u'Tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'ah hag'zeirah*. Along with prayer and Justice, we declare that it is through the act of Teshuvah, it is through the act of returning, that we will finally transform this hateful reality for us all. And we will build this world with love and kindness. So during the election season, and during the new year that is upon us, let us return. And let us transform ourselves and this world. May it be so. Amen.