

Shanah Tovah.

Tevye, the great *mentsch*, always has a word of wisdom. In Fiddler on the Roof, Tevye and the men gather in the center of the *shtetl*. They jockey, they banter on a Friday afternoon before Shabbat. Perchik, the young upstart from Kiev, berates them saying, “You should know what going on in the outside world.”

One man says: Why should I break my head about the outside world? Let the outside world break its own head.

Tevye says, “He’s right.” As the good book says, “If you spit in the air, it lands in your face.”

Perchik says back, “Nonsense! You can’t close your eyes to what is going on in the outside world.” “He’s right,” Tevye says.

Another man pipes up, saying, “He’s right and he’s right? They can’t both be right.”

Tevye says, “You know... you’re also right.”

We chuckle, we laugh. Of course Tevye’s right. You know the old joke: two Jews, five opinions. The great repositories of rabbinic thought, the Mishnah and the Talmud, preserve minority opinions. We pride ourselves on being so pluralistic, so inclusive in Jewish thought.

But is Tevye correct? Are they are both right? What does it mean for morality if two sides can be right? Will there ever be a decisive outcome in the name of truth?

The lighthearted Fiddler on the Roof scene quickly becomes complex in the reality of 2015. As soon as I say one single word, many people’s blood pressure will rise. This word should roll off a rabbi’s lips. Yet only a few will say, “It is the most natural thing in the world for the rabbi to talk about this today. Some will sigh, asking, “Does the rabbi have to talk about this?” And some will lean forward, thinking, “Will the rabbi get it right and agree with me?”

Everyone who is passionate about Israel thinks he has it right and that she has it wrong. When we express support for Israel’s security, some of us feel bullied or are accused of being anti-American. When we question Israel’s policies and decisions, some of us feel bullied or are accused of not being Zionist enough. Some of us feel we don’t know enough to speak at all. Israel reminds us of just how difficult it is to talk to each other.

And so, as my mentor, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, so perfectly said, “I am going to risk speaking about Israel, even though it is professionally a very bad move.” But we need to go there today because Torah has something to teach us. “How we can love Israel and still love one another?” The way we talk to each other about Israel mirrors the way we talk to each other about anything difficult...This is the work of the days leading up to Yom Kippur: to talk to each other, to reconcile ourselves with each other, to bring wholeness, peace- for us, for our relationships.

Two caveats:

1. Some think that rabbis should not express opinions about Israel because we are not qualified. I am not a policy expert, pundit or politician. But I speak through the millennia-old Jewish tradition as your rabbi. I speak from my heart.
2. It may surprise and aggravate some, that I will not express a position today on Iran Nuclear Deal. It is not because I don't have one, but because I believe that making my position the centerpiece of a sermon only further polarizes the community. My role is to make it possible for us to speak to each other.

Let's take a look at where we are when it comes to talking to each other about Israel. Here are five anecdotes:

1. Kol Shofar members have told me how members of their families couldn't talk to each other about the 2014 Israel/Gaza war. Family gatherings disrupted, tensions ran high because families couldn't talk to each other.
2. A rabbinic colleague keeps his opinions on Israel secret from his own congregation for fear of losing his pulpit. He may be the only Orthodox rabbi in the U.S. not opposed to the Iran deal.
3. A 22-year old was invited to join a closed Facebook group on Israel. Why? Young adults don't feel safe from verbal attack in their own synagogues-even when they sit down to pray next to someone who knows their opinions on Israel.

4. The New York Times published a chart showing Congressional Democrats opposing the Iran Nuclear Deal, along with Jewish population percentages in various states and districts. There was a column noting who was Jewish. Mid-day, online, editors pulled the “who is Jewish” column. But how do such charts influence how we as Americans speak or don’t speak about Israel?
5. Three hundred and forty rabbis from all streams of Judaism sent a letter to Members of Congress, to urge support for the deal. In response to the rabbis’ letter, a woman by the name of Ina writes: “If you are able to read and are a Jew who loves Israel, you cannot arrive at a “different” conclusion.”

I’ll say that again: If you are able to read and are a Jew who loves Israel, you cannot arrive at a “different” conclusion. This is what plagues our communities: the firmly-held idea that there is only one right way. Ina’s response flies in the face of Tevye’s wisdom. Even Tevye would beg us to do better.

If we can’t talk to each other, we deny one of the fundamental truths of Judaism: that we are all created in the image of God: *b’tzelem elohim*. So what gets in the way of our seeing each other *b’tzelem elohim*? Fear. Fear blocks us from seeing another person’s humanity.

And what do we fear? We are afraid for Israel’s security. We are afraid for the fragility of Israeli democracy. We are afraid because the State is surrounded by neighbors who are at best supportive only behind closed doors, and at worst, whose clerics call for the destruction of the state. We are afraid of being wiped out. We know all too well the attempts to annihilate our people. Such fear is genuine and legitimate. Fear is real.

We are so painfully aware of a growing culture of intolerance in some corners of our nation and in some neighborhoods in our world. It is this intolerance that drives us to say, “You cannot arrive at a different conclusion.”

But I am afraid of something else. I am afraid of intolerance, specifically in the Jewish community, when we are supposed to be *b’nei shalom*, people of peace. I am afraid that we can’t hold the space with our differences, to respect each other, to speak with civility. If we are not destroyed by warfare, we will be destroyed by the inability to speak to others who think differently from us. I am afraid of the senseless hatred, the *sinat hinam* that ate away at our ancestors and led to the destruction of the second temple. What would Tevye say? He

might remind us that senseless hatred is equivalent to the three worst sins in Judaism: idol worship, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed.

On the other hand, Hasidic tradition teaches us that even when you see something ugly in another person, you must see that God dwells in them too. This is true with our enemy, this is true with our friend and this is true with the person who is neither enemy, nor friend. And simply talking to such a person is the way to begin seeing humanity in the other.

I share with you my own personal journey I have taken right here in Marin, with some who many call the enemy. How did I seek this? How did I come to the table with these so-called enemies?

First, I offer a bit of background. Some of you are familiar with the BDS movement. BDS stands for boycott, divestment, sanctions. This movement seeks to bring economic pressure on Israel and to cause Israeli policy change regarding the Palestinian right of return and regarding the Occupied Territories. According to some, BDS is ultimately about bringing an end to the State of Israel. Boycotting Israeli products, divesting from Israeli investments and bringing multi-national sanctions on Israel are the focus of this movement. In June 2014, the Presbyterian Church of the United States voted to divest its retirement funds from three companies they claim are doing business in the Occupied Territories.

In many quarters of the Jewish community, it became clear that anyone who supported BDS or a component of BDS was the enemy. It became even clearer that speaking to BDS supporters or attempting to understand their point of view, meant being ostracized in the Jewish community.

And I thought to myself, "If we are only willing to talk to people who think exactly like we do, how are we going to bridge the gap between the Jewish community and others?" It seemed to me that the only options were going to rallies with like-minded people talking to each other, all of whom refused to come to the table with those on the other side.

Later that summer, I landed in Israel and the Israel Gaza war began. Although re-routed several times due to the war, I completed my trip and came home with a heavy heart. Did this war mean that there would be even less hope of talking with those on the other side?

Enter Reverend Carol Hovis, the Executive Director of the Marin Interfaith Council. Carol is a Presbyterian minister herself. I had barely been home a week when she reached out to Marin rabbis expressing her sadness and pain

about the unfolding events in Israel and Gaza. Even amidst these difficult events and the loss of life in the conflict, Rev. Hovis didn't forget the decision made by the national Presbyterian Church. She encouraged us to sit down at the table with our Christian colleagues to try to talk to each other about the war and about the Church's divestment decision.

For over a year, I have gathered on a monthly basis with three rabbis and six Presbyterian ministers, convened by Rev. Hovis. Finally, I had a way to question those who supported BDS or aspects of it, to listen, to learn, to struggle to connect with them.

And what have I learned?

1. While some Presbyterian clergy currently support BDS, not all of them do. They also disagree on other issues too. They are diverse and I have come to appreciate each of them as individuals.
2. I have learned about their sense of morality that drives them to want to act justly on behalf of others. I have a better sense of how we might marry the Jewish sense of justice with their Christian version in order to strengthen democracy in Israel.
3. I have learned they are open to working together, to invest in Israel and Palestine vs. divesting in Israel. We will act together and bring our faith communities along with us in these efforts.
4. I have learned that we can build trust. We are more connected. They have a better sense of the fragility of Israel's security. They have given us courage to continue to speak out on behalf of Israeli democracy, rights for all of Israeli citizens and the hope for a Two-State solution to the conflict, a hope that is shared by AIPAC, Jstreet and the mainstream Jewish American community.

We need to find a way to end the conflict, a way for Israelis and Palestinians to live a normal life. Some of us feel that BDS is not the right way to end the conflict, but it is our obligation to seek an answer, to seek hope. For that, we need to keep talking to each other, not to remain quiet, not to remain siloed in our echo chambers.

It is an honor for our entire community that Reverend Hovis is with us today. She is a true partner in this effort. I thank her for her love of Israel, her care for the Palestinian people and her support of this dialogue in the name of peace. Because of her, I have seen the face of the other and in turn, I have seen the face of God. This is what the Genesis tells us when Jacob begged that his gift

be accepted by his brother Esau. Jacob said, “to see your face is like seeing the face of God... (Gen. 33:10).

On this Rosh Hashanah, can we look into the face of the other and see God; into the face of someone with whom we have had conflict? How do we see God in the face of our estranged sibling, co-worker, friend or spouse? What blocks me from looking at her? What blocks me from listening to them; from talking with him? What could help me jump over that hurdle?

A young college student, Aviva Herr-Welber, who grew up in this community offers an inspiring answer. From the *bimah* on Shabbat, she recently taught about the Shma. “Shma Yisrael,” the prayer begins. “Listen, hear, use your ears,” it exclaims. And the Shma continues with “love- v’ahavta. “ It begs us to love. Yet when we feel deep love, for someone or something, we find it the most difficult to listen. Aviva tells us that “we have ripped the commandments of listening and loving apart.” How have we done this? She answers, “We only make room for our own definitions. We don’t listen to the views that exist beyond our own echo chambers. Perhaps we assume we already know what dissenting voices will have to say... “ Or, maybe we don't want to see that others’ views are just as valid as our own and worthy of our consideration.

We have to listen because we have to love. The Shma and Vahavta, forever entwine these two commandments: to listen and to love. We have to do them with all of our might, בכל מאוֹדך. And Tevye would say this is how we become whole. This is how we can say, “You are also right.” To see the truth in another human being is to choose wholeness and choose life.

Can we hear Tevye saying, “We have two ears and one mouth. May we be use them in proportion, use them in love.”

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