

ROSH HASHANA
THE NEED FOR CIVILITY
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RABBI VERNON KURTZ

In 1966, the television special “It’s The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown” first appeared in living rooms across the country. It was, of course, based upon the Peanuts comic strip written by its creator, Charles M. Schulz. In one of the scenes Linus, never without his blanket, philosophizes: “There are three things I’ve learned never to discuss with people: religion, politics, and the Great Pumpkin.”

I would change Linus’ words to bring them up-to-date to Rosh Hashana 5778. If he were philosophizing today as a Jew looking around the world, he might say: “There are three things I’ve learned never to discuss with people: religion, politics, and the State of Israel.”

We live in an age of polarization. We live in an age where dialogue seems to be almost impossible. We live in an age where it is very difficult to discuss meaningful issues even with members of your own family, both immediate and extended.

Matthew Gentzkow of Stanford University in a paper entitled *Polarization in 2016*, writes that since the mid-1990’s, partisan divisions have widened steadily with the difference growing in every election cycle. He informs us that “the increasing correlation of views across issues, and between issues and party identification, means that it is more accurate now than in the past to describe Americans as divided into two clear camps. We are less likely to find people holding liberal views on some issues and conservative views on others, or to meet a liberal Republican or conservative Democrat.” He continues, “Perhaps the most disturbing fact is that politics has become increasingly personal. We don’t see those on the other side as well-meaning people who happen to hold different opinions or to weigh conflicting goals differently. We see them as unintelligent and selfish, with views so perverse that they can be explained only by unimaginable cluelessness, or a dark ulterior motive. Either way, they pose a great threat to our nation.”

We have seen partisanship in politics and in government grow dramatically over the last few years. In a 2014 PEW Research Center study on the political polarization of the American public, the researchers inform us that the number of “Republicans who have very unfavorable opinions of the Democratic Party has jumped from 17% to 43% in the last 20 years. Similarly, the share of Democrats with very negative opinions of the Republican Party also has more than doubled, from 16% to 38%.” The research informs us that differences between the right and the left go beyond politics. They relate to the kind of community in which we want to live, the stores and restaurants we frequent, and the newspapers, digital media, and TV stations we read and listen to.

Some have suggested that this breakdown in civil discourse is because we live in echo chambers. We only talk to those who agree with our opinions and it is accentuated by social media, where people do not meet in personal communication, but only online. Murali Balaji, in

a blog in June of 2016, writes that “indeed, division in politics or even among various identity groups, is turning peers into adversaries demarcated by political, ethnic, religious, gender, and socioeconomic faultlines.”

I have been told that when families get together for holiday meals or social events, they are told, “Please stay away from politics.” And, the same sentiments are expressed concerning religious issues. Having been in Israel in June for the Jewish Agency meetings, I reported to the Congregation upon my return on the freezing of the Kotel compromise and the Conversion Law controversy. And this week the Prime Minister made the statement that he intends to stick to the freezing of the compromise. It is clear that there are deep fissures not only between Ultra-Orthodox and Liberal denominations, but even in the Orthodox movement itself. It is almost impossible to get everyone around one table to have a civil discourse, a polite dialogue, a meeting of the minds. Instead, recriminations, insinuations, and diatribes are used to describe one group by the other. This was only accentuated by the recent list of rabbis of all deminations blacklisted by the Chief Rabbinate.

I find it very sad, that whereas I have tried to put myself into positions where I can sit with others and learn from them, those opportunities are becoming fewer and far between. It is easier to listen to someone who agrees with you instead of being offered an opportunity to learn from others who may hold a view dissimilar to yours. The exchange of views has often become an uncivil, highly unpleasant experience. People holding diverse points of view have ceased to listen to one other. The lack of civility makes it more difficult, if not impossible, to find common ground.

The first PEW research study in Israel done in March of 2016 finds increasing polarization among Jews who live there, as well. The researchers found that the vast majority of ultra-Orthodox and secular Jews said that all or most of their friends belonged to the same subgroup and that they were married to a member of the same subgroup. Eighty percent of secular Jews said they would be either “not at all comfortable” or “not too comfortable” if their child were to marry a Christian. But 93% said they would feel this way if their child were to marry a Haredi, Ultra-Orthodox Jew. The PEW Research Center came to the conclusion that “Israel is becoming a more religiously polarized society, with both ultra-Orthodox, and secular Jews gaining ground on more moderately observant groups.” In short, both in the Diaspora and in Israel Jews don’t sit and dialogue with one another, don’t learn from one another, and don’t appreciate one another. When we profess an affinity for other Jews, we mean only those who are part of our landscape. And, when we try to deal with other Jews, we are most comfortable with those who think, believe, and act like us. This becomes our definition of Jewish unity.

If religion and politics are difficult to discuss, the policies of the State of Israel are becoming that way as well. There are many stories today of Rabbis who cannot talk about Israel from their pulpits lest either the right wing or the left wing in their congregation object to their statements. So, some of my colleagues have told me, it is safer not to talk about Israel, at all. What a shame. The miracle of our age goes unmentioned because we can’t agree with one another.

One of my teachers at the Hartman Institute, Micah Goodman, has written a new book in Hebrew whose title is translated into English as *Catch 67*. He writes that in Israel there is a great polarization of views having to do with the current political situation. He states that “the Right believes that withdrawing from the hills of Judea and Samaria will shrink Israel to tiny proportions, making it a weak and vulnerable country that will eventually collapse. The Left believes that the continued Israeli presence in the territories will crumble Israel morally, isolate it politically, and crush it demographically.”

Micah lives with his family in Kfar Adumim near Jericho on the road to the Dead Sea. He learned in teaching his students that where he lives, whether he has a Kippah on his head, even before he opens his mouth, dictates to some, what political views he holds. After a class discussion he writes: “What’s going on? A moment ago we were a unified group. A second later, a student cast doubt on my morality because of where I live, and others doubt her Zionism because she thinks I should not live there!”

In Israel there are those who dismiss the future of the Diaspora. Novelist A.B. Yehoshua, the Israel Prize laureate, in 2006 in a speech to the American Jewish Committee, stated that all Jews living outside of Israel, no matter how committed, giving or traditional – are “partial Jews,” whereas Israelis are “complete Jews.” Diaspora Jewry, he stated, deals only with part of Jewish identity while Israelis live it every day.

And in the Diaspora, Jewish views concerning Israel are very complex. Some have left wing views, others right wing ones, and it seems never the twain shall meet. Some see the plight of the State of Israel through a religious lens and others are much more liberal in their orientation. It, thus, has become very difficult to have a calm and civil discussion about the future of the State of Israel among Jews in the Diaspora, among Jews in Israel, and among Jews in the Diaspora with Jews in Israel. The great slogan of the United Jewish Appeal of a few years ago “We Are One” simply can’t be taken very seriously at this particular moment in history. We are polarized and have become uncivil in our discourse one with the other, if we even begin that discourse.

I find it very disconcerting and very disillusioning. In the global village in which we live, where 24/7 news is at our fingertips and instant communication allows us to be in touch with anyone around the world at any particular moment, we have become less unified, less respectful, and less dignified in our words and actions. I believe, if this continues, the very fabric of American society, the unity of the Jewish people, and the solid support for the State of Israel will be in crisis. Something must be done. Ultimately, whether we want to admit it or not, it can’t be left up to politicians, religious leaders, philosophers, military analysts, or television commentators alone. It starts with us.

Parker J. Palmer in his book *Healing the Heart of Democracy* writes that we must seek the common good and proposes practical ways to bridge our political divides. He explores five “Habits of the Heart” that we can all implement in our everyday life, in our families, neighborhoods, classrooms, congregations and work places to help build a civil society and a meaningful dialogue.

First, *We must understand that we are all in this together*. In the society in which we live we must appreciate that our success or failure as individuals is bound up with the success or failure of all of us.

We are only as strong as the weakest link in our society. We should be enraged about the number of victims killed by violence in the City of Chicago. We may feel safe and secure here on the North Shore but only a few miles from here, in the City of Chicago, people are being killed daily by gun violence and hatred. We must insist that our city, state, and federal officials, along with our police department work towards creating a feeling of safety and security for all. We cannot be satisfied that it does not affect us personally. We are all guilty and we are all responsible.

Second, Palmer writes, *We must develop an appreciation of the value of "otherness"*. We must understand the value of diversity, approaching one another with curiosity and wonder, rather than with fear and suspicion. We must acknowledge that we are all immigrants to this country. If we are not first generation immigrants then we are the products of second or third generation members of our family's who arrived on these shores. It does not have to be "us versus them." It can be "us and them." If we can't learn this we can't create community.

Third, *We must cultivate the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways*. Since our lives are filled with contradictions, if we fail to hold them creatively, these contradictions will shut us down and take us out of the action. He writes that, "when we allow their tensions to expand our hearts, they can open us up to new understandings of ourselves and our world, enhancing our lives and allowing us to enhance the lives of others." Being open to others allows us to grow ourselves. We do not need to necessarily change our point of view, but we can learn nuances that we may not have appreciated beforehand.

The fourth point Palmer makes is that *We must generate a sense of personal voice and agency*. We can't simply acknowledge that diversity exists. We must be participants in the conversation and the drama of life. His final point is that *We must strengthen our capacity to create community*. We need to create community in the places where we live and work strengthened by common values. Our actions can then have a ripple effect in society at-large.

In short, Palmer sets out for us a plan of action which will bring us closer to one another, not allow our differences to divide us, but teach us to appreciate one another. In the realm of the individual and the community we become stronger when we learn to talk with one another, work together, and appreciate one another. Without it, we will tear our society and our people apart.

2017 is touted as a year of Zionist anniversaries. We commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War and the reunification of Jerusalem in June; in August, we recalled the 120th anniversary of the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland; and in November we will remember 70 years since the United Nations vote on the British mandate of Palestine and the 100th year anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. But, there is another anniversary as well. It relates not to Jewish life or political life, but to sporting life. It was an event that changed not only the great American sport of baseball but, indeed, our society.

In 1947, Jackie Robinson broke Major League Baseball's color barrier when he played for the Brooklyn Dodgers under the ownership of Branch Rickey. From what I understand, Robinson had enormous difficulty being accepted by some of the players on his team and other teams, and by the fans throughout the country. Yet, despite taunts of racism and hatred, Robinson kept his cool and eventually showed his superior abilities as a baseball player and as a human being.

On May 13, 1947, Cincinnati fans were giving Robinson a particularly tough time as the Dodgers took the field in the bottom of the first. In a show of support, the Dodgers captain Pee Wee Reese temporarily left his position at shortstop, walked over to Robinson at first base, and put his arm around him. It silenced the crowd and showed the humanity of one person to the next. In 2005, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, unveiled a monument outside the Brooklyn Cyclones' home field depicting Pee Wee Reese and Jackie Robinson with Reese's arm around his teammate.

On May 17, 1947, Robinson's and his Brooklyn Dodgers, were at Forbes Field to play the Pittsburgh Pirates and their newly acquired first baseman, Hank Greenberg. During the course of the game Robinson laid down a bunt and the pitchers' throw pulled Greenberg off the bag into the base path. A collision occurred and knocked both of them to the ground. It could have led to a fight and a race riot. Instead, Greenberg calmly got up, dusted himself off, and returned to his position after Robinson ran to second base.

In the bottom of the inning, Greenberg drew a walk and headed to first base, Robinson's defensive position. Greenberg said to Robinson, "Don't pay attention to these guys who are trying to make it hard for you. Stick in there. I hope that you and I can get together for a talk. There are a few things I have learned down through the years that might help you and make it easier." Greenberg, of course, had to endure his own taunts as a Jewish ball player, especially as he was chasing the home run record of Babe Ruth. He knew what he was talking about.

These stories remind us that it is important to reach out to another human, sometimes even when it seems to be unpopular. Robinson writes that both of these events gave him courage, strength, and fortitude to make it through that season. They stand as a lasting tribute to inclusion not only in baseball, but in American society, at large.

In this country, we need more of that, people reaching across the divide both in society and in politics to create understanding and civil discourse. It is really not too difficult and definitely not impossible. However, unfortunately, today it does take courage, fortitude, and a willingness sometimes to be unpopular. We need leaders in this country and citizens on the street to join together for the common good and leave partisan politics and division aside.

In Jewish life it is the very same conduct that is needed. We must understand that much more unites us than will ever divide us. We have a common history and whether we like it or not, we have a common future destiny. We may not agree on all matters, but we must stand together to recognize that we are truly "responsible for the other". If we can't appreciate Hillel's statement that "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" then we will go down divided and be conquered. Jewish tradition has taught is that unity does not mean uniformity. The Talmud in

the tractate of Berachot states: “Our Rabbi taught: One who sees a population of Jews says: ‘Blessed is the Knower of Secrets,’ for just as their opinions do not resemble one another, neither do their faces resemble one another.” No page on the Talmud is without serious disagreement. We are of many backgrounds, but possess one common heritage. We have but one land and one Torah. We may have different views on the policies of the State of Israel, but we remain committed to its survival. We may understand the Torah differently, but we all stood at Sinai and accepted the obligation of “We will do and we will obey.”

One of the reasons for Rosh Hashana, according to our tradition, is that man was put on this earth on the 1st of Tishri. We all come from that one human being created in the image of G-d. Yet, we are all different. No two people have ever been created exactly alike. In the Tosefta of Sotah we are told: “One may say to oneself since the House of Shammai says ‘impure’ and the House of Hillel says, ‘pure’, one prohibits and one permits; why should I continue to learn Torah?’ Therefore, the Torah says: ‘And G-d spoke all these words.’ All these words were given by a single Shepherd. One G-d created them, one Provider gave them, the Blessed Ruler of all creation spoke them. Therefore, make your heart into a many-chambered room, and bring into it both the words of the House of Shammai and the words of the House of Hillel, both the words of those who forbid and the words of those who permit.”

We must be open to listen to others. We must learn the art of civil discourse. We will agree with some, disagree with others, but must learn not to demean one another personally. Jewish life and the support of the State of Israel is going to be dependent upon these principles. We are a small people, we are a tiny nation, we have a wonderful, but yet, complex, complicated beleaguered State. We are all in this together whether we recognize it or not. And in this country, the lesson is the same. We can pull ourselves apart or learn to work together to create a society based on the highest ideals of our founders.

I pray that as we begin the new year of 5778 we shall recognize our obligation to be responsible citizens of this country, loyal supporters of the State of Israel, and create a society which is based upon respect, tolerance, civility, and yes, love for one another.