Civil And Respectful Discourse in this Election Season: What Jews Can Offer America and Each Other

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We are well into election season. On November 6 the voters will decide who will be our President starting in January and who will represent us in the Senate and the House of Representatives.

As the election approaches we need to decide which candidates we support for these offices and how we will make up our minds. To do that, we need to know as best we can which candidates we trust to be telling us the truth.

How should we talk about the election with our family and friends? Where do we look to find convincing evidence of the truth about all the competing claims?

Before I address these important questions I want to help you relax about one question. It's the question I am NOT going to address.

You might be thinking, "Is the rabbi going to tell us what he thinks about the candidates? Are we going to hear a sermon about how to vote? Isn't that wrong?"

Yes, it is wrong. And no, I won't do that. Responses to the email I sent about my sermons made it clear that congregants don't want me to preach about who should win and who should lose. And that's not something I will do or had any intention to do.

What I have to say is not an argument for how each of us should vote. It's wrong for a rabbi to do that. I knew that already. The Jewish Advocate last week had an article that quoted a number of rabbis who agree with me.

It's wrong for me to do that because I have the microphone and you don't. I have the privilege of speaking from this pulpit for fifteen minutes and nobody else has a chance to speak at all.

So why am I discussing the election? Because congregants told me that husbands and wives were disagreeing about the election and they would welcome advice on how to disagree peacefully.

That's what I want to talk about. How we can talk about the issues without getting into fights. And where we can find unbiased analysis of the truth of competing claims;

My advice begins with a fundamentally Jewish approach to truth. We recognize that nobody has a monopoly on the truth. When two are engaged in discussion, each can educate the other. To do so requires that we appreciate the concept of multiple truths.

Take one famous example. It is a teaching of Rabbi Hillel. He was one of the greatest of the early Talmudic scholars. In a collection of wise sayings, Pirkei Avot, we have the following often quoted saying of Hillel:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

But if I am for myself alone, what am I?

And if not now, when?

Im ein ani li, mi li?

Uc'she'ani l'atzmi, ma ani?

V'im lo acshav, eimatai?

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Hillel begins by pointing to himself. He is the person to whom he owes a duty. The need to look out for Number One. The imperative to take care of ourselves.

But he immediately turns that around. He says, "Wait. That's true. But it's not the whole truth. I can't go through life caring only about me. If I do that, what do I amount to? That's no way to live."

And then the necessary third piece of the truth: "I can't wait around to figure this out. I can't delay action while I try to balance my needs with the needs of others. No. I need to go ahead and take action. Sometimes to meet my

own needs first. Sometimes to meet the needs of others ahead of my own. But always knowing it's better to act than to remain on the sidelines doing nothing."

Hillel knew, and we know, that life is complex. We are rightly suspicious of simplistic answers. We believe that no single idea can exhaust authenticity. No single idea can be the total truth.

We insist, rather, on finding truth by acknowledging that there is more than one way to the truth. Judaism does not accept that only one way is completely right and the other way completely wrong.

We can see this in the Jewish approach to some basic questions about life and about God..

Is Judaism concerned mostly with ourselves, the Jewish people? Or do we care more broadly? Do we include in our concerns the larger world, beyond the boundaries of Judaism?

Hillel has already given us his answer: we must be concerned about our own people, but not to the exclusion of other peoples.

We find both answers also in one of our most familiar texts, the Passover Haggadah. In one famous passage, we curse the nations who came against us to persecute us. But the Haggadah also includes a blessing for the righteous nations.

Let us ask the same question about God. Is God Avinu or Malkeinu? Do we see God as an intimate, loving parent, as Avinu, which means "Our Father"? Or do we understand God as a distant, demanding monarch, as Malkeinu, which means "Our King"?

Or take another dimension of the divine in the Jewish imagination. Do we see God primarily as the true judge, as Dayan Ha'Emet, the name we use to refer to God when we learn of a death? Or do we understand God mainly as the compassionate companion of the sick and the needy, as Harachamim, which means "The Compassionate One"?

Here's how the ancient rabbis approached these dichotomies. They taught that God is like a statue or any work of art. We can perceive divinity from different directions and perspectives. Each time we look, in each situation in our lives, at each stage of our maturity, we may perceive something different from what we saw before. So there is no one, single answer.

Thinking that issues have more than one solution can be hard. It's difficult to see some of the truth in one solution and some in the opposite solution. We generally crave certainty. We don't like waffling or weaseling.

Our contemporary world, however, brims with complexities and difficulties. It is not realistic to expect absolute and unchanging certainty.

This is what we can bring to our conversations about the election. These conversations are usually much too shrill. These conversations often seem to discount utterly and completely any dissenting or questioning view.

Judaism, however, loves the other view, the questioning view, the competing opinion. We revel in the struggle between tradition and modernity. Between the old and the novel. Between the text and the commentary on the text.

If you haven't had the pleasure of learning in a bet midrash, try it sometime. Or visit the Bet Midrash at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Newton. I spent six wonderful years learning there. The Bet Midrash is a library where voices are raised, not shushed. Students argue with each other. Sometimes we jab at the table or at the page of Talmud. We might raise our voices to be heard above the din when we feel passionately about a point. But we also listen to our study partner.

Judaism is brilliant in insisting that learning must be an oral process. It must be done out loud by two people looking at the same text. That study pair is called in Hebrew a hevruta. The word hevruta is derived from the Hebrew word for friend. The pair of students in a hevruta engage in friendly argument and the give and take that lead to understanding.

Take a look at a page of Talmud. It's a very noisy page. It's covered with differing opinions and arguments. Opinions are countered by opposite opinions. The text preserves both the argument and the contrary argument. It is in the opposition of those arguments that the truth resides.

Here is one of the most redemptive lessons we Jews can teach America and each other during this election season. It is a new mitzvah.

Find someone who you believe is likely to vote for the candidate who opposes your candidate. Then open a true dialogue. Ask what the person believes. Ask with genuine curiosity. Not in a challenging way, but in a way that makes clear you sincerely want to know. In the same manner, also ask why. Then listen carefully and respectfully for the answer. Only then should you ask for an opportunity to explain in the same manner what you believe and your reasons.

I offer three suggestions for these conversations. These ideas I derive from my long experience in mediation when I was a lawyer. I base them also on my current experience as a rabbi and as an arbitrator with the American Arbitration Association.

First suggestion. Don't have important conversations like these on the phone or while standing up. Give yourselves the time and attention the discussion deserves. Do it somewhere comfortable and relatively quiet and free of distraction. Agree that the phone will not be answered during the conversation. And sit down for the entire conversation. If we want to make serious progress toward mutual understanding, we need to treat these conversations seriously.

Second suggestion. Try to explore together the factual basis for your positions and the reasons behind what you believe. Do this in a truly open way, with a genuine desire to learn. Do not seek as your objective to persuade the other person to a different view. No. Your purpose is to understand the other person, and make yourself understood, while maintaining a good relationship. This begins by understanding what facts the person is considering and why the person believes those facts and why the person thinks they are significant.

How can we uncover which claims are true? We hear competing claims in our conversations and on TV, on the radio, in political ads and political debates. How can we tell which claims are based on true facts and which are not?

Fortunately, that's quite easy. There are many websites that review such claims in a non-partisan and objective fashion. I have listed seven of them on a list that can be taken home after services today. Copies of that list are in the lobby. Please take one when you leave today. I will also email the list to both congregations. And you can reach the electronic version of that list by clicking HERE.

Please consult these websites. Please circulate the list to family and friends. This way both you and they can check the facts directly. We do not have to be at the mercy of the advertisers and the media to get the facts.

Here is my third suggestion. Make sure you've understood the other person's view. Here's how to do it. When the other person has done explaining, before you start explaining, say something like: "Please tell me if I've understood you. I hear you saying that you think the following issues are most important for you." Then you say what the issues are. Then you go on, "And because that's what is most important in your view, you plan to vote the way you are planning to vote because you believe your candidate is more likely than the other to be effective in achieving what you hope will be achieved on those issues."

When the person with whom you are discussing the issues agrees that yes, you have fully understood the other position, then ask for the opportunity to explain your position in the same detail.

In Judaism we have a great model for this approach. The Talmud scholar I mentioned previously, Rabbi Hillel, and his followers were known as Beit Hillel,

the House of Hillel. They often disagreed with Beit Shammai, the followers of Rabbi Shammai. Yet in the majority of their disagreements, the preferred position as reflected in the Talmud was the one taken by Beit Hillel, not Beit Shammai.

Why was that? The Talmud asks the same question.

And here's the answer. Beit Hillel would always state the position of Beit Shammai before stating their own opinion. Beit Hillel understood that the opinions of Beit Shammai were not utterly devoid of truth. They were worthy of being stated, even if doing so was a prelude to providing a contrary view.

You might wonder whether the followers of these two leaders got along with each other despite their frequent disagreements. The Talmud asked this same question. The Talmud answered that question with a resounding "yes." Here's how they knew that the disagreements did not lead to animosity. The sons and daughters of Beit Hillel married the sons and daughters of Beit Shammai.

Respectful disagreement, with clear understanding of each other's viewpoints and values, does not weaken a family or a friendship. On the contrary. Such disagreements, when conducted with respect, strengthen those relationships by deepening our understanding of one another.

The oldest inscription in Jerusalem is the one found at Hezekiah's tunnel, south of the Temple Mount. That tunnel was hammered through a mountain of solid rock by teams of workers who carved out the tunnel working from both ends toward the middle.

Here's how they did it. One team of workers began at one side of the mountain. Another team began at the other side. They dug through the rock toward each other. Each team was following a plan they had laid out. The idea was to meet in the middle.

The ancient inscription, 2800 years old, still exists. The tunnel has survived, and the inscription has survived. The inscription describes the final efforts of the two teams as they approached each other, cutting through the rock that remained between them. Here is what is written on that inscription:

> And this is the way that the tunnel was cut through: Each man toward his fellow. While there were still three cubits to be cut through, there was heard the sound of a man calling to his fellow. When the tunnel was driven through, the quarrymen hewed the rock, each man toward his fellow, axe against axe, and the water flowed from the spring toward the reservoir for 1200 cubits.

We make progress in our political discourse in the same way. By cutting through the tunnel in the rock that divides us. Each one calling to the other.

Moving toward the other. Striving toward the truth of which each of us owns only a part.

May our discourse be civil and our friendships be strengthened as we consider and exchange our views in a spirit of genuine curiosity during this election season and throughout the new year.

And let us say, Amen.