

Rabbi Bloom's Yom Kippur Morning Sermon October 9, 2019

Why are Jews always arguing with each other? Even God called us a stiff necked people, probably because we are always complaining and fighting amongst ourselves. Isn't that part of the tradition which gave birth to the adage two Jews and three opinions? We fight and argue and we recall the rabbinic dictum that the Holy Temple was destroyed because of the baseless hatred perpetrated Jew against Jew. That is what made us weak and susceptible to the Roman war against the Jewish people.

This notion that Jews are always arguing has a good side, however, because it is part of the age old methodology that arguing over the meaning of sacred texts ultimately leads towards unlocking the truth about what God's words mean to us. Dialectic leads to debate and argumentation.

The issue is whether such infighting crosses over the line from healthy debate on any issue -- let alone a sacred text of Torah or Talmud -- to argumentation which violates the basis of decent human conduct. In other words, is there a point when we fail the mensch test?

Yom Kippur, put simply, is all about self-reflection with the goal of determining whether we failed the mensch test. Clearly we are living in times when people are pushing the limits of debate, engaging furiously in arguments on social issues of the day and on the character of our nation's elected leaders. And does this not all trickle down to us? Does infighting challenge our religious solidarity? Have we put at risk that mensch side of ourselves, succumbing to the uncompromising passions of our nature? If the answer is yes, should we stop for a moment today and ask whether we gave up some beautiful friendships? Did we lose a grip because of these unbridled emotions regarding the world around us? If we did and if there were occasions when we admit that we did not live up to the mensch standard, then maybe we have some unfinished business today in our personal deliberations with God.

Let me tell you a story about how arguing in Judaism can be a problem for us in passing the mensch test. We argue so much with each other the rabbis tell us that one day even the angels on high got into an argument about whether God should create human beings. They broke up into different groups and factions. One said, "God, you should create human beings!" But others said, "No God, don't do it! Do not create human beings!" The ministering angels of love declared, "God, create human beings for they will perform acts of loving kindness!"

The angels of truth countered, "No way God. Humans lie. Don't do it!"

Righteousness said, "Please God, human beings will act in righteousness!"

Peace said, "Do not create humankind because they will create and stir up strife forever!"

So, what was God to do? Heed the call of his ministering angels to create or not create human beings?"

Right at that moment God decided to cast Truth out of heaven to the earth.

All the ministering angels united and protested against God for this action. They said, "God, Truth is your seal! How can You put Truth to shame?"

Finally, a Rabbi Huna, a leader amongst the rabbis, addressed the ministering angels on high and declared, "What are you arguing about? While you were arguing over whether God should or should not create human beings, God already did so. What good is all this arguing? It's done! God already created humankind" (Midrash Genesis Rabbah).

The rabbi is excoriating the ministering angels that their back and forth and putting themselves against each other and God too led them to a fruitless and pointless outcome. Man exists and they argue for naught!

Does this idea of breaking up into factions and opposing groups arguing with each other remind us of today's conflicts too? We can argue all we want but what happens on a national or international level goes beyond our scope of engagement. Yet, we argue as if the outcomes to the most burning social issues depend on our responses. Friendships are compromised and bitterness turns into divisiveness. Communities suffer and the fabric of society is torn apart.

People talk about finding the middle ground in a debate, but I don't think that is the solution. What is the pathway towards maintaining civility and respectful conduct when we passionately disagree with each other?

For me it is the mensch test. What is a mensch? The origin of the word mensch is German and it literally means a man. The Jewish interpretation means a person of integrity and honor. Leo Rosten, in his book *The Joys of Yiddish* wrote, *mensch* "is 'someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character. The key to being 'a real mensch' is nothing less than character, rectitude, dignity, a sense of what is right, responsible, decorous."

Where is the value of *menschlichkeit* in our Jewish relationships today? Where did we lose that previous gold standard as we further descended into the depths of division and argumentation? Today the argument is not about what is the truth. The argument is not about finding an insight and a value we can all agree on, even if, in the short run, we disagree. Rather today the infighting is about winning and losing. It is about saying; "I'm right and you're wrong!" How does that work for us in the long run? That kind of attitude is likened to the burning effects of acid on our human relationships.

I have witnessed this war-like attitude inside our temple and in our society at large, just like you probably have too in your interactions with your neighbors. This lack of tolerance leads to hurtful words, while off-color jokes on politics offends people, and the next thing

we know those long-time friendships are destroyed. When that happens, have we not failed the mensch test?

Atonement is all about examining ourselves as to whether what we say to others, even in jest, comes off as hurtful and alienating. When will we learn how to say to each other words like, 'I couldn't disagree with you more but I love you as my friend and I will not sacrifice that friendship'? How about you?' In my opinion that approach is passing the mensch test. We may not compromise our viewpoints, but, do we have to end up sacrificing the years of friendship for our political viewpoints? Do we define another person only for their opinions on the social issues of the day or the political culture one subscribes to? Is that what defines us now?

Clearly, I have a unique role as rabbi on this topic. I have stated my opinions in my newspaper column on many hot topic issues such as immigration and anti-Semitism in particular and criticized extremists on both sides of the partisan divide -- just to name a few. Not everyone agrees with me, but, I always base my opinions on Jewish values and sacred texts. I feel blessed when folks who do not agree with me still value my teachings and service to the congregation.

I have learned from you my congregation that it is sad when we become so addicted to the opioids of our own viewpoints that we lose sight of the integrity and value of an entire human being and ignore their longstanding good reputation when that individual opposes our viewpoints. But this happens more and more today. Verbal dueling threatens the stability of our congregation here and in many other temples across the nation. The mensch test is about being clear that good and decent people can strongly disagree with each other. Yet does that fact dictate ending a friendship? If so, then have we not lost our moral compass and failed the mensch test?

It appeared from the Midrash that God did not really care what his ministering angels were arguing about when it came to the question of whether God should create humankind. They became so entangled in their rhetoric that they too lost sight of the fact that despite their arguing with or about the Holy One, God created humankind anyway in spite of their arguments.

Being a mensch means prioritizing our issues with other folks as to what is worth fighting about. Being a mensch means get out of an "I'm right and you're wrong" state of mind. Instead, being a mensch means learning how to listen respectfully, disagree with dignity and reaffirm our bottom-line loyalty to a long-lived friendship. I have a congregation I love. I have seen all sorts of behavior and witnessed mensch and non-mensch behavior. We must, therefore, work together on being *menschen* all the time. So I urge us to reach out to acknowledge frayed relationships and begin to heal them. This is what Teshuvah is all about. Embrace our friends and love them for the entire person who we have respected and loved over the years. That is what religion should teach us. "Derech Eretz Kadmah LaTorah: Good manners and decent behavior precedes the Torah itself."

The Torah portion this morning speaks about how important it is that the Israelites turn their hearts to God and follow in God's ways. God says, I have put before them the blessing and the curse. Choose life."

For me on Yom Kippur this verse means choosing the path of the heart and not the path of rejecting and judging people with self-righteous indignation. Judge ourselves first and then speak with dignity and honor to those around us. The Torah says we will inherit the land God promised. I believe we shall inherit more than that. We will inherit the life of our community and sustain it for the future generations who enter our gates. Going in this pathway is, indeed, the best example for choosing life.
L'shana Tova Tikatevu v'Tikatemu