

Before we begin one of the most impactful moments of the Jewish year, before we even utter the words *Kol Nidrei*, we start with an introductory paragraph that communicates an incredible amount within its brief few verses. While the leader is responsible for reciting the words, we are meant to join in the recitation, most especially when we share this phrase: “*Anu matirin lehitpalel im avaryanim*,” -- which literally means “*We grant permission to pray with transgressors.*”

The impact of this verse is tremendous in that each of us, as a unified community, has a responsibility to permit one another and ourselves to join the entire congregation on this holy evening. But the specific people we ask for the strength to pray alongside are the *avaryanim*. This ancient word has many meanings and few origin stories, but I would like to focus on one translation. *Avaryanim* shares its Hebrew root with the word *me'ever*, which means to cross over or to stand on the other side.

Therefore, when we, as a united front, grant permission to pray alongside those who stand on the other side, we essentially recognize the inherent truth of the human condition. Namely, we do not always agree with one another. In fact, there are many with whom we vehemently disagree. Yet, we still understand the importance of coming together despite those differences on this sacred night.

For thousands of years, Jews have understood the importance of coming together despite differences. Even Jews who faced excommunication for not abiding by specific Jewish laws were invited back to the congregation on Yom Kippur because it was a time of forging and reestablishing relationships and voicing solidarity, just as it is today.

What has been abundantly clear is that to be human and in relationship is to expose oneself to arguments, differences of opinion, and full-on disagreements. That is our nature. We must ask: is that a negative thing? Not necessarily...

Our tradition has long understood conflict as a potential act for producing the exceptional when done with respect, honor, and equity.

Disagreeing is not bad—it is not harmful if done correctly for the right reasons. Disagreements can be sacred acts.

In Rabbinic Judaism, there has always been a strong emphasis on *machloket* or disagreement. For instance, the Talmud, the primary Rabbinic work of the first millennium, documents thousands of *machlokot*, which are conflicts or disputes among the Rabbis. The Rabbis viewed engaging in *machloket* as crucial to discovering the truth. The key, however, is to engage in *machloket* constructively—one that preserves the relationship.

Mishna Avot 5:17

Every machloket (conflict), which is l'shem shamayim, is destined to endure. And that which is not l'shem shamayim is destined not to endure.

What does it mean to be “destined to endure?” This means that the relationship between people in the disagreement will thrive.

In other words, sometimes, people engage in disagreements that are destructive to the relationship. In these cases, the conflict becomes so personal that it is no longer about the initial disagreement but rather about the individuals involved, leading to hurt feelings.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z”l, the former Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, taught:

The destructive nature of argument not for the sake of Heaven — is the argument for the sake of victory. In such a conflict, what is at stake is not truth but power, and the result is that both sides suffer. If you win, I lose. But if I win, I also lose, because in diminishing you, I diminish myself... Argument for the sake of power is a lose-lose scenario. The opposite is the case when the argument is for the sake of truth. If I win, I win. But if I lose I also win — because being defeated by the truth is the only form of defeat that is also a victory.

As Rabbi Sacks identified, conflict can be a catalyst for learning and growth when handled properly, as demonstrated in the text from the Mishnah.

Often, perspective is the primary difference between two or more people in a disagreement.

In Tom Stoppard's play and film *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the two minor characters in *Hamlet* are the central figures. The narrative is presented from their perspective. In one scene, the two of them are heatedly arguing over a trivial point, while in the background, Hamlet is pacing back and forth, muttering to himself, “To be or not to be, that is the question,” to which they are totally oblivious—from the perspective of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the most celebrated soliloquy in English literature never occurred.

These two minor characters see the world differently from Hamlet. They may even feel like they are living in separate worlds where the two virtually never meet, and their perspective, while confusing and removed, is true to who they are.

According to the author of the book *Seek, How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life and Change the World*, perspective is the lens through which we often view the world, colored by

experiences, culture, and inherent human tendencies. The author, Scott Shigeoka, teaches that perspective is comprised of the ABC's:

Assumptions - perceived truths.

Biases - automatic judgments about people and situations.

Certainty - knowing all we need to know.

Our assumptions, biases, and certainty instruct our deeply held opinions and form our outlook on the world, including our personal foundational truths. When those beliefs conflict with one another, we find ourselves in a disagreement. As I shared earlier, the rabbinic tradition understands disagreement as one of the most important religious and cognitive practices when done in such a way that the argument and the people will endure.

This is called *l'shem shamayim* - *for the sake of heaven*. When a dispute is not *l'shem shamayim* (*for the sake of Heaven*), it takes on a completely different quality, which can be destructive, tearing one another apart and down.

This process of disagreement follows a destructive path. For example, when two people build sequestering walls, dehumanizing each other, they make the other an adversary or even an enemy as if they are at war. Wendy Smith and Marianne Lewis name this approach to argumentation Trench Warfare in their outstanding work *Both/And Thinking: Embracing Creative Tensions to Solve Your Toughest Problems*.

In WWI, trench warfare was one of the primary tools utilized for battle. Each side dug wide and deep crevice-like spaces, encamping in the ground and firing and lobbing attacks at one another until the fight ended, resulting in destruction and defeat. Smith and Lewis propose that we also participate in trench warfare when we can't listen or connect with others, surrounding ourselves with those who agree and lobbing attacks at the opposition.

We never emerge from our trenches to meet in the middle and communicate respectfully and mutually. We view the other side as an existential threat, focusing on their most extreme language and behavior and setting out to win as they lose.

Additionally, we feel supported in our trenches by those on "our side." We call this the echo chamber, when all the voices we surround ourselves with, including the media outlets we watch and follow, agree with our point of view. So, there is rarely space in our lives to encounter another perspective we can internalize and analyze.

The extreme version of this approach takes place in the digital world. Research shows that people who hide behind anonymity online are far more likely to engage in hate language, insults,

and abuse. This is called the Inhibition Effect. Engaging in arguments online is often emotionally destructive and can even lead to physical effects. One element of this principle is the immediacy available when arguing with another can be dangerous. Very rarely is the immediate response the best response.

There is a popular song about relationships and arguments, in which the artist Morgan Wallen sings: “I can’t remember everything we said, but we said it all.” When we say it all, especially when we are so heated that we can not remember what we said, our trench warfare is out of control, and we most likely did not accomplish what we set out to.

The role of relationships is essential to productively participating in a disagreement. When there is a foundation of respect, honor, and sanctity, arguments can live on - they can be *l’shem shamayim - for the sake of Heaven*. However, what happens when encountering the other has the potential to harm us?

Rabbi Sharon Brous teaches:

“There are limits. As much as we strive to find the humanity in the other or even hints of truth in their perspectives, sometimes it is naive and wrong to pretend that all adversaries are righteous and that just perspectives in every argument.”¹

Sometimes, a behavior or ideology is so toxic that to give oxygen to their arguments, it validates violence or abuse.

Brous continues: “So many of us have experienced the breakage of our time: friends who reject science, parents who embrace conspiracy theories, and colleagues whose hearts have become hardened to the point that they are no longer recognizable.”²

While we most often disagree with those in our circle, just by way of proximity, there are those beyond that circle whose hearts are so hardened that engaging with them genuinely renders us unsafe. I am reminded of the subway in NYC when a mob of anti-Israel protesters got on the train and demanded to know who was a Zionist while shouting horrifying chants so they could do only who knows what to them.

The Torah discusses hardened hearts extensively, most especially the heart of Pharaoh, which prevented the ruler of Egypt from releasing the Israelites from bondage. Moses and Aaron could barely engage with the Pharaoh; instead, the Pharaoh consistently made the lives of the Israelites even more difficult and insecure. How could we ever engage with someone with a heart so

¹ Rabbi Sharon Brous, *The Amen Effect*, page 161

² Brous 151

hardened that they are emotionally or physically dangerous? Or what if their belief system is so appalling that they put us and others at risk? We construct the sequestering walls with them and condemn their words and actions.

It is not our responsibility to go through this kind of encounter, to engage in the painful and potentially dangerous work of opening the heart of someone consumed by hatred and violence. However, these are the exceptions and not the rules. The majority of the people with whom we may disagree are not consumed by malice, rushing to violence, racism, or hate. But, when we treat each other like we are the ultimate enemy, like we are existential threats to one another, we lose so much.

There is an internal tension because we are taught to pursue a heart opposite of Pharaoh's: to seek a softened and open heart. But never at the risk of our well-being. So what about when the risks are not existential? How can we construct a disagreement for the sake of Heaven?

The prophet Ezekiel teaches that the ultimate goal is to seek a heart open to the world's goodness. He revealed that God's ultimate desire was to: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and you a heart of flesh."³ Ezekiel identifies that to be in a relationship; we need to remove the hardness and open ourselves to the potential of disagreements that will live on.

The Jewish tradition encourages open communication, sharing ideas even when they contradict, and, most importantly, learning from perspectives that do not conform to our own. This is emphasized in the Talmudic tradition:

Why did the House of Hillel merit to have the law affixed according to their perspective? Because they were pleasant and patient, and they taught both their own perspective and that of the House of Shammai. Not only that, but they actually gave precedence to the perspective of the House of Shammai before their own perspective.⁴

A conversation's value is learning and building relationships, but we are so busy trying to make our point that we miss out. People are more open to hearing us, and we're more likely to listen to others when there is a foundational relationship. We need to shift away from focusing so intensely on winning, which will create an open channel of respectful conversation. There is a way to sit in discomfort and still maintain a relationship.

Prior to the start of the High Holiday season, I attended a webinar for rabbis to discuss potential challenges of this time of year. One of the statements that resonated with me was when the

³ Ezekiel 36:26

⁴ B. Talmud Eruvin 13b

moderator said, “Please do your best to discuss the world in such a way that people can still have dinner together,” So, I thought it best to discuss how we can still have dinner together when our fasting holiday is over, even when we disagree.

Only if there is a foundational relationship can we be open to hearing the “other side.” It is a skill to engage with people with different viewpoints, to sit and listen even when their opinions may trigger something within us. Hopefully, we can channel those feelings into genuine curiosity and respect. Therefore, we need to know who to speak with instead of those with whom we should not engage. Additionally, we need to make ourselves aware of when to have tough conversations.

As I shared earlier, social media is not the proper forum to calmly and respectfully disagree and still maintain a positive connection. The research is staggering in terms of the type of behavior people participate in when there is even a hint of anonymity. And even when there is no anonymity, the tone is especially difficult to determine through these forums, removing the conversation's human element.

We should also not engage in disagreement if we do not have the emotional capacity to do so. Our tradition emphasizes the importance of self-preservation, especially regarding our emotional health. The Book of Psalms teaches, “Seek peace and pursue peace.”⁵ This applies to external and internal peace.

What we want most often is to be heard. Not necessarily for the other to agree with us, as beneficial as that might be, but primarily to be listened to and understood. We can learn to use our voices and ears because listening is an act of justice. Genuine curiosity about the other’s point of view gives us the capacity and skills to build or enrich a relationship. This means that we need to be especially careful about the ways in which we argue and the words we use.

How many of us have said it all? In-person or digitally? Often, the words that would be the most effective for an argument, for Heaven's sake, do not come from a visceral reaction. So it is best to write down a response, as angry as it may be, save it close by, and step away. When we return the next day with a clearer outlook and a calmer demeanor, we can decide if our original message was correct.

Sometimes, we must acknowledge that despite how strong a relationship may be, specific topics may no longer be part of the healthy conversation. The election may be off the table. Geopolitics and local politics, even as complex as they may be for both people, might also be off the table. As heart-wrenching as it may be for some families, discussing the current situation in Israel might also be off the table. When we disagree so vehemently that it damages the relationship, perhaps it's time to let that part of the dynamic go.

⁵ Psalms 34:15

This evening's topic is not a response to a political crisis; it responds to the spiritual crisis we face as individuals, families, and communities. When we see people with whom we disagree as adversaries, despite the essential relationships we share, we ignore their humanity. Our tradition encourages us to see ourselves as sources of light to push away the darkness.

The outstanding songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote: "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

He was alluding to the fact that there is always darkness but also the possibility of light and of pushing away the darkness because, in light, we find goodness, kindness, and sanctity. That is our individual and collective mission on this holy day of Yom Kippur. Importantly, the goal is not unanimity; that is the opposite of the human condition. After all, we each are someone else's *avaryanim*—*people who stand on the other side* of the argument.

Our tradition has many *berachot*—*blessings*—that we can recite for almost any circumstance. For example, when we see a beautiful sight, we say, "Blessed are You, Lord our God, Sovereign of all, who makes the work of creation." Or before we partake in a meal including bread, we will recite the *HaMotzi*: "Blessed are You, Lord our God, Sovereign of all, who brings forth bread from the earth."

Suppose you attend an event with a large attendance. There is also a blessing for that moment, which fits this evening: "*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam, m'shaneh habriyot. Blessed are You, Lord our God, Sovereign of all, who makes different kinds of beings.*" In other words, it is truly a blessing that we are made distinct from one another and that diversity is where we find the woven threads of the Jewish people's beautiful tapestry. Whether we view each other as those who stand opposite us or members of the same house, may this be a time when we bridge the deep chasms and move forward toward crafting disagreements for the sake of Heaven that will continue to endure just as we do.