



When We Speak Out

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When I was young, my family used to love to go out to eat together. We had a great time once we had arrived at the restaurant, but the car ride tended not to be so fun. That was when we tried to decide where to go. “Where do you want to go tonight?” “I don’t know. Anything’s fine with me.” Where do you want to go?” This was our conversation week after week. The truth is that we all had strong preferences. If it were up to my father, we would eat Italian food. My mother longed for sushi, my sister wanted vegetarian, and I loved Thai. But to listen to my family deciding where to go on a given evening was to hear a group of the most flexible and agreeable people you’d ever seen. None of us wanted to be difficult. We would all try to guess what the other wanted and choose a restaurant that would make everyone happy.

Thinking back on those moments, I can’t avoid the belief that in some situations, niceness is overrated. And while Judaism does in a way teach us to be nice – we are commanded not to do to others what we would not want them to do to us – Jewish tradition hardly teaches us to be nice at the expense of speaking our minds or disagreeing with each other. The Talmud, which contains hundreds of laws concerning how to live our lives, includes even more dissenting opinions, openly expressed – opinions that are sometimes more interesting and thought-provoking than the final ruling. Our first patriarch Abraham, chosen for his great faith, argues vehemently with God over the destruction of the city of Sodom. This story is not repeated often enough for all to recognize, but its right there in Genesis: God plans to destroy the city, because it is full of

evil, and Abraham, astonishingly, has the courage to take issue with God’s decision. Abraham actually argues with God, and in turn, God accepts his proposal, agreeing to spare Sodom if as few as ten righteous people can be found there. As it turns out, Abraham is unable to find even ten righteous people, and the city is destroyed. But he teaches us by his actions that even God is not beyond challenge, asking rhetorically, “Shall the judge of all the earth not deal justly?” And God teaches us the importance of being open and unafraid of another’s different opinion.

With all this in mind, I think surely I would have been within my right, years ago, to give voice to my wish for Thai food, even if my family wouldn’t agree. Here at TRS, some of my favorite moments are ones full of disagreement. Shabbat morning Torah study, with its 50 participants gathered over bagels, is loaded with questioning and argument, and sometimes it gets a little heated! Some of the best learning moments during my study with B’nai Mitzvah students come when he or she disagrees with the lesson presented by the Torah portion we have read. In fact, for many of us, when it comes to stories like the binding of Isaac – which we’ll read from the Torah scroll tomorrow morning – or the flood, we may learn more from questioning the plain message of the text than we would from an uncritical reading.

According to our tradition, disagreement is not only to be tolerated – it is essential. In a Talmudic legend, the great rabbi Reish Lakish is devastated at the death of his Torah study partner, Yochanan. His disciples try to console him. They find him the brightest possible scholar to replace

Yochanan. The two study together, but Reish Lakish remains unfulfilled. “Why,” his disciples ask him, “Your new partner is so brilliant; surely he is a worthy partner?” “He is indeed brilliant,” Reish Lakish replies. “Every time I present an interpretation, he can instantly produce 40 ways to prove that my reading is correct. But Yochanan used to bring 40 proofs that I was incorrect. That is what I miss.”

Reish Lakish understands that no matter how sure we are of our opinions, we could easily be wrong. It seems obvious, but how often do we openly seek to understand and entertain an opposing view on a topic that matters to us? We know instinctively that we need some controversy in our lives, and perhaps especially in our relationships. One of my favorite episodes of *Seinfeld* is one in which Jerry feels like he’s finally met his soul mate, a woman with all the same likes and dislikes as his, even mannerisms and habits. They break up, of course, when they realize they have nothing interesting to talk about. But do we apply the same thing to the opinions we hold? We need disagreement not only to keep us interested. We need it to keep us thinking, to find better ideas and better answers. Sometimes, we need it to keep us honest. Left to our own devices, with no one to challenge our thinking, we tend to assume we are correct, especially when it serves our interest. We rationalize selfish behavior until someone challenges us. We might say, “Oh, it’s OK, my wife loves doing the dishes. She finds it relaxing.” And we may really believe it to be true. Then again, perhaps it just takes some courage to respond, “Actually, I would really appreciate some help.” But when we do, things can change for the better.

For healthy disagreement, we have to listen, and we have to speak out. We must express our opinions to each other and be ready for confrontation, or essential conversations will never take place, and questions that need to be asked will go unheard. This is not easy, and we shy away from confrontation more than we are willing to admit.

In the Torah, there may be no better example of this than a terrible crime committed by eleven young men against their brother. Their brother Joseph is spoiled and obnoxious, tagging along after his older brothers in the field. They are jealous of their father’s love for him and angry at Joseph’s own dreams of grandeur. As Joseph approaches the group in the field one day, one of the brothers makes a wild suggestion. “Let’s kill him and throw him into one of the pits!” As they mull the idea over, the oldest brother Reuben sees disaster coming. He tries to save Joseph. He says to them, “Don’t shed any blood! Cast him into that pit in the wilderness, but don’t touch him yourselves.” Reuben’s plan is to let them think they’re leaving Joseph to die, so he can get back later secretly, and save him. Then Reuben leaves. Meanwhile, Judah, another elder brother, wants to save Joseph too, and he has no idea what Reuben is thinking. He pictures Joseph dying all alone in the desert, and he seizes the only chance he sees. He suggests that they sell Joseph to a passing band of slave traders. The group accepts Judah’s plan, and when Reuben returns to save Joseph, he is gone. These eleven young men, innocent until now, have done something horrifying – and why? Because two of their eldest brothers were afraid to say, even to each other, that they didn’t want to. If either one of them had spoken out, he would have found support from the other. And who knows whether each of these frightened younger brothers was thinking the same thing? The text doesn’t even tell us whose idea it was to kill Joseph in the first place, leaving open the possibility that not even one of them really wanted to do it! In other words, Joseph’s brothers committed this horrible act – against their own brother – just because nobody wanted to make waves.

The story of Joseph and his brothers teaches us that, ironically, silence speaks. It shows us that, believe it or not, people are looking to us – just as we look to them – for the courage to speak out against a prevailing view. If we all remain silent, it can make for a false and dangerous consensus. While Joseph is lying in the pit, his brothers sit down to eat. Imagine what that meal might be like for them, each

one looking around, gauging the others' faces, trying to decide whether they should be alarmed at what they are doing. Think of how little it might take to break the silence: perhaps a single expression of second thoughts, or a glance between two anxious brothers.

On the other hand, when we do raise our voices, it can go a long way. As a positive contrast to Joseph's brothers, the Torah offers us Joseph himself, a fearless truth teller. He tells his brothers about his dreams of eventually being their leader, and it gets him into trouble. Then he stands up against his slave master's wife, and he gets thrown in jail. Every time he is faced with a choice, he is uncompromisingly true to himself and his beliefs, and it makes his life miserable, until finally, he stands before Pharaoh. This time, again and without hesitation, he predicts seven years of famine – bad news to a ruler who could have him executed in a moment. Instead, he is put in charge of Egypt and saves millions from catastrophe.

There are so many ways we can speak out, and our Torah is full of stories in which our heroes make waves and change things for the better. In fact, Jewish history has been full of positive controversy, including right here in the 1960's, when the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts were drafted in the conference room of the Reform Movement's Washington office, the Religious Action Center, and later, when that same office became a hub for protests against the Vietnam War.

This congregation raises our voices together and grows from it as well. Chesterbrook residences, the mixed-income assisted living community right next door, is the result in part of this congregation's effort and advocacy, and it faced opposition, even within our congregation. If we and other local organizations had shied away from that dialog, the opportunity would have been lost for many residents, several of whom are our members, to continue to live in this community as they grow older. Our congregation has spoken out frequently in recent years on the issue of affordable

housing in our larger community, a need that must be addressed and on which there has been significant progress recently in Falls Church. There are members of Rodef Shalom who are less than fully satisfied with that progress and the form it has taken. I spoke with some of them about it at a meeting of the Falls Church City Council, where we had each stood and expressed our divergent views. That dialog helped me understand their concerns and learn more about the Falls Church community.

On the environment, too, we have had a great deal of activity this past year. The TRS Green team, in addition to helping the congregation and its interested members to find creative ways to conserve our environment, has been outspoken on several important issues. Some of those issues, too, have not enjoyed consensus in the congregation, which is not a bad thing – it has led to good conversations. One, in April, was an engaging debate on the coal mining power plant which has since been approved by the state in Southwest Virginia. Both sides were represented, and we talked about the issues as Jews, applying the values we learn and teach. In conversations like these, we benefit from each other's wisdom and passion. It's OK if we disagree; it's part of being partners in a sacred community.

To say that it's OK does not mean that's easy or risk-free. We can't all be Joseph, and we should not, because the Joseph example is more than just a one-dimensional symbol. The struggles he goes through tell us that unfortunately, we are right to be afraid of speaking out, that when we make waves they can sometimes crash in on us. I don't need to remind you of the many people who lost their lives in search of civil rights or an end to the Vietnam War. I don't have to, because we already know it on our own personal terms. We might have convictions and emotions that, if spoken aloud, could cause problems with our jobs, relationships or other parts of our lives. There are truths that could be hurtful to others or ourselves, and conflicts that cannot be won, only lost. So no, we can't hope to be Joseph – we are more like Reuben and Judah, trying to do our best, and at times

having difficulty. What we can do is learn from Reuben and Judah's mistake, not to hold inside what we know we need to say out loud. We might find that when we can speak out about what matters to us, more people than we realize feel just as we do. Others may learn from us and join us. Still others may challenge us and we will learn together. In the dialog that follows from our disagreement, we ourselves might find that our own opinions change or grow more nuanced. We also might grow to be more comfortable with disagreement and the confrontations that come with it. In our personal relationships as well as on larger issues, when we speak out loud, we open ourselves up. We create possibilities for change and opportunities to really know each other and each other's needs. We invite all kinds of growth. I can tell you from my own experiences since childhood, when I sat silently wishing for Thai food: if you take a risk and speak out once, and then again, it does get easier. We really do a favor for a child when we encourage them to speak their minds. We encourage them to be like the Abraham of Sodom, not the Reuben or the Judah of Joseph, and it begins in the car as well as on the playground.

Two rabbinic sages in the Mishnah, named Hillel and Shammai, are famous for disagreeing with each other. For every rabbinic question, there was an answer from the school of Hillel and one from the school of Shammai. These differences are lifted up by our tradition as the type of controversy that is *L'sheim Shamayim*, for the sake of Heaven. No matter how heatedly they differed, they never forgot that in the end, they were on the same side. Every time a member of one camp spoke on an issue, he would begin by deferentially citing the other camp's opinion first. Most importantly, these two groups of scholars ate together and prayed together. To them, living as Jews meant prayer, comfort and celebration, but they knew, from the words of Isaiah that we read on Yom Kippur, that it's not enough to pray for peace and justice without working towards it. They had to wrestle together with the difficult issues.

The same truth holds for us as we act in the world and within this community. Sharing our lives together means sharing thoughts, opinions and feelings, when it's easy and when it's hard. There are times for singing in unison and in perfect harmony, and there are times for dissonance as well, for well-intentioned controversies and for loving disagreements – disagreements that are *L'sheim Shamayim*, for the sake of Heaven. When we speak out, we challenge others – as well as ourselves. As I might have learned as a child going out to eat with my family, when we speak out, who knows – we might just get what we want. We create opportunities when we speak out. We open dialogues. We make room for change.