

## **You Are Both Right!**

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In a recent public debate—it received scant coverage in the press—Karl Rove, former political advisor to President George W. Bush, and Howard Dean, the onetime presidential candidate and most recently chairman of the Democratic National Committee, two fiercely partisan politicians, sat opposite each other in a lecture hall at DePauw University.

At one point Rove attacked Dean “you occupy a position so far to the radical left...that it is way beyond where most Americans sit.” “As opposed to me,” declared Rove, “I am part of the common-sense right.”

Dr. Dean responded, “I appreciate my friend referring to himself as the common-sense right, common sense, right? Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

In truth the men, who are actually good friends went on to debate everything from health care, to the war in Afghanistan, to immigration policy, agreed on very little, with one very significant exception. “Disagree on the issues,” each challenged the students, “but bring civility back to the national debate.”

There is a great old story, you’ve probably heard it...most likely because I told it to you. But truthfully, I can’t remember whether or not I used this before, and if I did, it’s probably safe to assume you don’t remember it either.

A rabbi was sitting in his study pouring over the sacred texts, when a member of his flock dashed through the door of his study. The man was clearly troubled.

“Rabbi I need to ask you a question! Shmuale promised to lend me 100 rubles until Friday, and its only Wednesday and he wants his money back? Don’t you think that’s unfair???”

The rabbi lifted his head from his books, “You know,” agreed the wise rabbi, “Your right. I’ll see what I can do.”

The man left, satisfied that he had convinced the rabbi of the veracity of his claim. Ten minutes later, in storms Shmuale, also clearly distressed.

“Rabbi,” he cried, “You need to talk to Yitchak. I lent him 100 rubles with the condition that he would use it to buy chickens to sell at the market. Instead he bought a horse, and since he misled me, I want my money back...now! Don’t you think I’m right?”

Said the wise rabbi, “You know, you’re right.”

Shmuel left feeling affirmed.

Just as the revered rabbi was returning to his sacred books, the janitor who had been cleaning up outside his study walked through the door.

“No disrespect, intended, Rabbi, but I was mopping up outside the office, and I just heard you tell Yitchak he was right, and after he left and Shmuel came in and told you his side of the story, you told him *he* was right. They can’t both be right!!!”

“You know,” said the rabbi, stroking his long beard, “Your right.”

The rabbi was more than likely pouring over one of the volumes of the Talmud, or as it is sometimes known, “The Oral Law.” The Talmud, in contrast to the Torah, which is referred to as the “Written Law,” is a record of a few generations of very scholarly sages, rabbis, who debated back and forth the application of the often-obscure laws found in the Torah.

The Talmud exists because while many of the Torah’s laws make perfect sense and are easily applied, like “Don’t put a stumbling block before the blind,” “Leave the corners of your field un-harvested so the poor can come and have food to eat.” “Honor your mother and father.” “Do not steal, murder, nor lie,” many others are ambiguous and unclear.

For example, that entire section in the Book of Leviticus, that deals only with Temple sacrifice. After the Temple was destroyed two thousand years ago, the rabbis were not a hurry to bring back animal sacrifice, a rather primitive method of worship, so they found a way to disregard all these laws.

Most modern Jews do not spend long hours immersed in Talmud study, however Talmudic methodology has survived. It is in fact, one of the greatest gifts the ancient sages have bequeathed to the world.

And by the way, you know how one qualified to become a Talmudic sage. I wasn't by taking a course on line, or applying for a position on Monster.com. Rather one had to take a test. The rabbis would determine whether one was fit to sit on the court if a candidate could find fifty reasons why something was permitted, **and** fifty reasons why it was not. In the eyes of the rabbis, being able to see both sides of an issue was a virtue, not a weakness.

This is how the Talmud worked. A controversy would be brought to the attention of the sages. Each side would passionately articulate their position using every available bit of evidence they could find. One was forbidden from lying, inventing untruths or manipulating the facts in order to support their case. No vilification, slander or defamation of character of the other side was allowed.

Doesn't sound particularly familiar, does it?

This past summer all across our nation, we were treated to one of the most ugly displays of uncivil discourse that I can remember. The debate surrounding the very complex issue of health care was hijacked by the extremes and what we witnessed was more heat than light, more demagoguery than leadership.

The certainty of both sides, the unwillingness to listen to reason, a disregard for truth, the vilification of the other side, has led yet another delay in fixing on of our nation's most compelling and urgent challenges.

What is most unfortunate about the way in which this debate has taken place, is that many of our political leaders have the capability, to engage in a fruitful debate, leading if not to a perfect solution, at least some progress.

After Senator Edward Kennedy's death this summer, some of the most touching tributes did not come from the usual suspects. Of course one would expect President Obama to deliver a beautiful homily, and he didn't disappoint. And representatives of the Kennedy family offered warm, affectionate and moving eulogies.

But it was from the Senator's opponents: Orin Hatch, John McCain, that the most stirring accolades came. People with whom he passionately and zealously disagreed, emotionally offered examples of spirited partisan debate, and ultimately, bipartisan compromise.

Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, who was roundly criticized by conservative Catholics for participating in Ted Kennedy's funeral rites because the senator supported a women's right to choose, a serious violation of catholic doctrine, wrote eloquently on his blog:

*As Archbishop of Boston, I considered it appropriate to represent the Church at this liturgy out of respect for the Senator, his family, those who attended the Mass and all those who were praying for the Senator and his family at this difficult time. We are people of faith and we believe in a loving and forgiving God from whom we seek mercy.*

In other words...we disagree, but you're a human being and so am I. We are children of God and we can find common ground.

Next week, on Yom Kippur we will recite an expansive list of "*al chets*," of sins we have committed throughout the year. The transgressions range from gluttony to sexual immorality to gossip.

One that is overlooked, but no less serious is "*tzarut ayin*"...literally the narrowing of the eyes, or otherwise known as "narrow-mindedness." When we are so certain of the veracity of our own position, when with such unbending conviction we are certain we are right, there comes an objectification of the other.

Seeing the other's position as not about sacrificing your own deeply held convictions. It is opening one's eyes, and acknowledging the humanity of our opponent, at least enough so that some dialogue can begin.

Greater civility in our public debate is not simply a nod to conventional etiquette. It does not preclude an honest assessment of the past and a critical analysis of failed policies. Civility is not the enemy of disagreement, but the condition under which disagreements can be seriously entertained and ultimately consensus reached.

Let me clear. I am not saying our minds should be so open that everything falls out. Judaism teaches there are some truths that are absolute: The pursuit of moral integrity, a rejection of all kinds of idolatry, which

includes self and material things. There is an unyielding faith in our human longing for meaning, and purpose, and hope in life.

Those who are pro-choice, understand that personal autonomy is a sacred right. But my pro-life Christian colleagues, men whom I respect, but with whom I passionately and respectfully disagree, teach me about their supreme commitment to the sanctity of even the potential for life.

Some Americans have a traditional view of marriage. Their understanding is one steeped in historic definitions. Others of us believe that the definition of marriage should be determined by love and commitment, not gender.

And about health care...I have neither the knowledge nor the wisdom to understand all of the vagaries of this complicated issue. However, would it not stand to reason that there is some common ground that men and women of good will and intelligence can find?

It was President Bush who said it best in his State of the Union address in 2006 when he eloquently called for greater civility in our public debates about national policy. "Our differences cannot be allowed to harden into anger," he said.

The rabbis teach that when Abraham was called to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac atop Mt. Moriah, it was not until Abraham *opened his eyes*, and saw a ram in the thicket that God decided to spare the boy.

To this day, it is not the bright sound of a violin or the mournful echo of a cello that we hear on Rosh Hashanah, but rather the ram's horn. For it reminds us of that moment when Abraham opened his eyes, and saw the ram. The ram was always there Abraham just couldn't see it.

When our eyes are closed, so are our hearts. When our hearts are closed, so is our mind.

In Hebrew, the word for truth is: *emet*...or *emes*...as some would pronounce it. The word is spelled *aleph, mem tav*...the first letter of the alphabet, the middle letter, and last letter. In other words, truth is inclusive...it brings together the two extremes, which meet in the middle.

There is a path somewhere between over-confidence and capitulation, certainty and surrender...where we passionately defend the values we cherish, but we do it with civility, and respect, and leave a place for those with whom we disagree.

Sadly, at the very moment that temperance and reason are needed most, so many have lost their voice, and surrendered to the demagoguery of the extremes.

I think we Jews have something to offer our country. We who have been shaped by a tradition that values vigorous and open and truthful debate, have been silent.

Rosh Hashanah is a day of hope and promise. There lies before us a clean slate. We will determine what is written on the pages of next year's book of life. It is we who are called to the work of *tikun olam*, finding a way fix all that has failed in the year that has past. Not by silence, but by intelligent, thoughtful and reasoned debate.

Author Robert Fulghum wrote: The line between good and evil, hope and despair does not divide the world between us and them. It runs down the middle of every one of us. I do not want to talk to you about what you understand about this world, I want to know what you will do about it. I do not want to know what you hope, I want to know what you will work for. I do not want your sympathy for the needs of humanity, I want your muscle. As the wagon driver said when they came to a long hard hill: "Them that's going on with us, get out and push. Them that ain't, get out of the way."

These are troubled times...but there have been challenges in every age. I have faith in our country, in its leaders, in our form of government.

And I believe we Jews, not exclusively, certain not, but we do have something unique to contribute. But not when we sit silently on the sidelines. Not when we absent ourselves from the debate.

When we remind the world, by our own actions and words that there is a spark of the divine in every human being, even those with whom we disagree... there is no challenge we cannot meet, no obstacle we cannot overcome. We can move forward. We become the sacred vessels through which God's love *for all his people* can be manifest in the world.