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When opinions differ, keep the peace

Shammai Engelmayer

We are on a fast track towards the High Holy Days. Rosh Hashanah begins one week from this Sunday evening. Yom Kippur follows 10 days later. Now is the time to examine our lives and find those behaviors that are wanting and require change. In other words, it is time to repent our sins.

The only question is what sins are we talking about? As I have noted in the past, except for oblique references in the two Yom Kippur confessionals (“We have sinned” and “For the sin of”), we are not praying for forgiveness for violating ritual laws. The very fact of the obliqueness of such references tells us the sins for which we seek forgiveness have little to do with ritual behavior. The last mishnah in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Yoma (which deals with issues relating to Yom Kippur), would seem to confirm this: “For sins between a person and God, Yom Kippur provides forgiveness, but for sins a person commits against another person, Yom Kippur does not provide forgiveness unless that person has made amends to the person harmed.” (See BT Yoma 58b.)

Make no mistake. God demands loyalty and He insists this loyalty be made manifest through our observance of His commandments. Yet, simply stated, the sins we must concentrate on over the High Holy Days have more to do with how we behave towards each other and towards the world God gave us, than how we behave towards God.

This is brought home in the text of the Ahl Cheyt [For the sin of] litany, known also as the Great Confessional, the *vidui rabbah,* that we recite over and again during Yom Kippur. They include “the sin we have committed before You with the utterance of the lips..., in speech…, by impurity of lips…, by folly of the mouth…, by levity..., by deliberate lying..., by slander..., by the conversation of our lips..., by tale-bearing.”

These nine “sins” make up better than one out of every five on the list. It becomes even more overwhelming if we throw in some of the others on the list, such as “for insincere confession” and “vain oaths” and “hasty condemnation,” each of which also involves speech and each of which has a very specific focus.

Of course, not all sins involve speech. There are such sins as “sinful meditating,” and “baseless hatred,” and “envy.” These sins involve thoughts, which means sins can involve our minds, not just our mouths.

I recently overheard a conversation between two friends. Both agreed regarding a particular political matter. One, however, said to the other: “I’m glad we agree on that because if we didn’t, I could no longer be your friend.”

In one way or another, this statement is repeated all too often these days. Our discourse—be it on matters political or religious—has ceased to be civil and is causing too many of us to separate ourselves from those who think differently, often to the detriment of both sides. It is why for example, we have two boards of rabbis in our community, because one side at least will not sit with the other to discuss matters of mutual concern. Such behavior, on any level, also violates many of the Ahl Cheyt litany.

Beyond the words of the confessional, our tradition has much to say in opposition to such statements and behavior. People have a right to their opinions and should be respected for them, not demeaned because of them. As “Rabbi Meir would say, ‘[One] person is different from another in three ways: In voice, in appearance, and in thought.” (See BT Sanhedrin 38a.)

Why is what Rabbi Meir saying relevant? As BT Berachot 58a teaches us, when one sees a crowd of people, one sees people “whose minds are unlike each other and whose faces are unlike each other” because God made us all different in mind as well as appearance. Thinking differently is a God-given right. Only by hearing all sides of an argument can one reach a reasonable opinion.

So we are taught in BT Avodah Zara 19a: “[What does Psalms 1:3 mean when it says,] ‘And he shall be like a tree planted by streams of water’? The school of Rabbi Yannai [likens a Torah scholar to] a replanted tree [that was uprooted from its original location….This teaches us that] anyone who learns Torah from [only] one teacher never sees a sign of blessing….[Said Rav Chisda] This concerns reasoning [which requires hearing different opinions].”

The same holds true for any issue. Anyone who hears one side of an argument and closes his or her mind to any other side “never sees a sign of blessing.” In other words, it never goes well when an opinion is based on one-sided arguments.

The perfect example of how to deal with differing opinions is found in BT Eruvin 13b. “For three years,” it tells us, “the [students of the] School of Shammai and the School of Hillel disagreed. These said: The halachah is in accordance with us, and these said: The halachah is in accordance with us.” The disputes between them grew to a point that peaceful coexistence was almost impossible. At that point, in order that there be peace among the followers of each school, a voice from heaven intervened: “These and those are both the words of the living God.”

The voice added, however, that “the halachah is in accordance with the School of Hillel.”

The ensuing discussion wondered why, if both sides are “the words of the living God,” preference is given to the School of Hillel’s rulings. The reason, we are told, is that the followers of Hillel were not only respectful of the School of Shammai’s opinions, they would teach those opinions before teaching their own. Rashi expands on this in his commentary. Each side, he said, would cite a different biblical verse in support of its opinion. Rather than dismissing the verse cited by the School of Shammai, the School of Hillel would first go out of its way to demonstrate why the School of Shammai considered that citation to be applicable before defending its own position.

From this, the Talmud says, we learn “that anyone who humbles himself, the Holy One, Blessed be He, exalts him, and anyone who exalts himself, the Holy One, Blessed be He, humbles him. Anyone who seeks greatness, greatness flees from him, but anyone who flees from greatness, greatness seeks him.”

We learn a similar lesson from BT Sotah 40a. The sage Rabbi Abbahu believed himself to be a humble person, until he heard about a lecture given by a colleague through an interpreter. The colleague at one point described a matter in one way, but the interpreter gave the listeners his own opinion instead. Nevertheless, the colleague “did not object,” Rabbi Abbahu said. “I realized [then that] I am not humble.”

The Talmud quickly insisted that Abbahu indeed was a humble person in his own right. It even reported an incident between Abbahu’s wife and the wife of another scholar. The latter disparaged Abbahu, and his wife told him about it. It was of no concern, he said. “Through me and through him [the other scholar] the One above will be exalted.”

Peaceful coexistence between people is emphasized over and again. In Pirkei Avot 1:18, it is cited as one of the three things upon which the world stands.

In Mishnah Pe’a1:1 , “bringing peace between one person and another” is cited as one of those traits for which a person “enjoys their profits in this world, and the principal remains for him for the World-to-Come.” The Talmud, in BT Kiddushin 40a, elaborates on this: “[W]ith regard to bringing peace it is written [in Psalms 34:15]: ‘Seek peace and pursue it.’” Said Rabbi Abbahu, this teaches that one who pursues peace will also merit life, prosperity, and honor.

Then there is this teaching from Pirkei Avot 1:12: “Hillel says, ‘Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving the creatures and bringing them closer to Torah.’”

This statement is explained in chapter 12 of an expanded version of Pirkei Avot known as Avot of Rabbi Natan. “[W]hen two men had quarreled with each other,” it says, “Aaron would go and sit down with one of them and say to him: ‘My son, hear what your fellow is saying! He beats his breast and tears his clothing, saying, “Woe unto me! How shall I lift my eyes and look upon my fellow! I am ashamed before him, for it is I who treated him offensively.”’ He would sit with him until [the man] had removed all rancor from his heart, and then Aaron would go and sit with the other one” and repeat the scene. “And when the two men met each other,” the text continues, “they would em­brace and kiss each other.”

As we approach the High Holy Days, and given the tenor of the times, how to deal with friends, relatives and colleagues on issues that divide us must be high on our list of behaviors we need to address, as difficult as that may be for all of us.

May you all have a sweet, productive and peaceful 5780.