

**Crossing the divide**  
Erev RH 2024  
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Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed over. The other guy whips out his phone and calls 911. When the operator answers, he nervously exclaims, "My friend, my friend is dead! What should I do?" The operator says, "Calm down. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." "Oh, okay," the caller responds. There is a silence and then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy anxiously says, "OK, now what?"<sup>1</sup>

Oh, that was a very, very bad joke. This will be on my confessional list on Yom Kippur. Truth be told, I couldn't find a better one but it at least highlights the toll of misunderstandings. For most of us, a missed cue or lack of communication is not a matter of life and death. It can be as minor as clarifying what we said or what we meant. But it can also lead to divisiveness that can be very difficult to overcome. As we are approaching another presidential election, ongoing war in the Middle East, and significant dissonance in our country, we are living, undeniably, in a time of polarization.

Yes, I realize those who lived through the Civil rights era or Vietnam War, would say the same thing. There was massive upheaval in our country in the 1960's and 1970's. There were significant protests, outbursts of violence, and arrests. Perhaps, our time may not seem so contentious by comparison, but we can recognize that people being divided on political and social issues is nothing new. There have been strong divisions across people of different ages and generations. There are differences between religions or the lack thereof. And many can see things through dramatically different political perspectives.

Ecclesiastes states that, **וְאֵין כֹּל-תְהִיָּה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ** "There is nothing new beneath the sun!"<sup>2</sup> And yes, human nature has not changed in thousands of years, but what makes our time more challenging is that we are divided in new ways. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, 20<sup>th</sup> century American politician and diplomat, famously said, "You are entitled to your opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts." The problem we have today, though, is that there is no agreement on what the facts are. Too easily, we can seek out sources of information to confirm what we want to believe. Many of us get our news reports from the social media sites of our choosing. We can decide which news station we like. And we can avoid any information that counters our preferred world view. I am worried that as we build our own private silos, we have a lot to lose. There are miscalculations about the intent of others because of their voting preferences. We really don't understand why the people in our families, neighborhoods, and communities feel as they do. And while the consequences may not be as stark as life or death

in a hunting accident, they can have many outcomes for our society and for the quality of our individual lives.

Let's start with something less provocative. When I attended the Central Conference of American Rabbi's conference last spring, I sat in on a fascinating session called, "L'dor vador, generational differences," with psychologist Betsy Stone. She highlighted the many differences between the Boomer, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z generations. To be considered a Baby Boomer, you were born between 1946-1964. Raise your hand if you are a Boomer. For this generation, most moms stayed at home, kids could play in the neighborhood, and there was freedom and generally more optimism about life. In the workplace, loyalty was valued, people met face to face, and identity and profession were very interconnected. Regarding Israel, there was a belief that Israel was vulnerable and never again should Israel or Jews be under seize.

Who is a Gen Xer? Gen Xers were born 1965-1980. This generation grew up with birth control being available, divorce was on the rise, 40% of kids were latchkey kids who generally didn't play outside, and TV was the babysitter. This era faced economic hardships and the start of school shootings. In the workplace, there was a budding awareness of having a work/life balance, career growth, and a desire for managers to be supportive. This generation has been struggling to find its relationship with Israel.

Millennials are born 1981-1995. How many of you are Millennials? Their mothers and fathers parented in a helicopter style where the path was prepared for the child as opposed to the child being prepared for the path. There was a desire for the kids to be 'happy' instead of them being able to manage. This is an era of participation trophies, amber alerts, video games, and families that are less hierarchical. In the workplace, Millennials care about transformational experiences over, "what we do." They will switch jobs for career advancement and need to be valued for their knowledge and expertise. Regarding Israel, this generation sees it as a super power and is horrified by Israel's actions in Gaza.

And then Gen Z is born 1996-2012. How many of you are in this generation? Gen Z is distrustful of government and big organizations, they are digital mavens, and willing to incur debt. They struggle disproportionately with stress and anxiety and were significantly impacted by the pandemic. They care about diversity, social justice and they want to impact the workplace, not simply to enter it.

What is fascinating about thinking about the generations is not who is the best generation, we would all say, it is our own of course, but how our time and upbringing has shaped us into the people we are today. If we can wrap our minds around these differences, perhaps we can create bridges of understanding that can lessen our misconceptions of one another. What would it be like to ask someone older or younger than ourselves, "Why do you believe as you do? What do you value and why?" If we can ask questions with genuine curiosity and explore without

judgment, we will learn things that we didn't know before. We have the power to make connections that can strengthen inter-generational relationships.

This can also hold true for those of us with different political philosophies, views on Israel, and more. I find one of the many barriers that we have is that the meaning of words and labels are misunderstood. Words such as: Zionist, Conservative, Progressive, Jew, cease fire, genocide, freedom, choice, and woke, to name only a few examples. I'm sure just mentioning these words can raise a heartbeat or two, but I think it's important that as we use words that define who we are or what we believe, it is incumbent in conversations to ask, 'What does one mean by such terms?' One who is a Zionist may have a very different definition than one who lists Zionism along with other pejorative terms such as racism. What does it mean to be a Conservative, Liberal, or Progressive? It can be a bit in the eye of the beholder.

This past October on National Public Radio, they did a segment entitled, "Dude, I'm Done': When Politics Tears Families and Friendships Apart" on All Things Considered.<sup>3</sup> Tovia Smith, NPR National Correspondent, highlighted a number of stories of friends and family severing relationships because of differing political philosophies. She says, "They are among the many Americans for whom political rifts have deepened. It's one thing to disagree about something such as tax policy...but they see their differences now as ones of basic morality, core values and character, and that cannot be overlooked."

Jocelyn Kiley, associate director of research at the Pew Research center, said, "Political polarization is more intense now than at any point in modern history. Nearly 80% of Americans now have "just a few" or no friends at all across the aisle, according to Pew. And the animosity goes both ways. A poll by the Public Religion Institute, "shows that 8 in 10 Republicans believe the Democratic Party has been taken over by socialists, while 8 in 10 Democrats believe the Republican Party has been taken over by racists. The report is aptly named, "Dueling Realities."

We have been guilty of exaggerating the perspectives of those who are different from us, according to Tania Israel, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She states that, "The rancor is rising...as both sides "tend to view the other as being more extreme than they actually are." She points out that both liberals and conservatives tend to view themselves as fair while the other side is considered irrational. She believes that we all have these blind spots where our side is the righteous one and the other side is wicked. Tania counsels that we need to engage in more listening, try less to convince others that we are right, and have more intellectual humility.

I believe that we have so much to lose by isolating ourselves from those from a differing generation, political party, or who have another view on social or world issues. We are missing out on people who have made a difference in our lives. We are curtailing our understanding of

others. And we are shrinking the circle of meaningful relationships. Perhaps, it doesn't have to be so.

The Chasidic master, Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, offers wisdom on relating to other people. He instructs us to rise above anger and offence by looking for a *nekudah tovah*, a little point of goodness, in others.<sup>4</sup> Yes, it doesn't have to be a lot, just something small, a little dot of decency or kindness. Even one whom we believe to be vile or truly annoying, can have it. If we are honest with ourselves, we can recognize that despite their obnoxious view, our friend, family member, or neighbor is not akin to a child murderer, Hitler, or Osama bin Laden. Nachman teaches that we should identify any amount of morality or virtue. And then, we should focus on this, when we see or interact with this person.

And so, can we find something good in our friends, family, or coworkers? Are they funny, kind, loving, generous, or entertaining? Do they contribute to the safety of our neighbors, support civic institutions, and contribute to houses of worship? For those with a different view on Israel, immigration, abortion, Trump, or Democrats, can we find in them any redeeming quality? Have they ever done anything sweet, considerate, or kind? Are they a loving son/daughter, mother/father, sister or brother? Are they hard working? Do they have a big heart? Do they worry about their future and their children?

I have a neighbor, two houses down, who flies a huge flag with the blue stripe in it. I mean you can't miss it, when you drive down the street. I remember years ago, the Prop 8 sign he had on his lawn, advocating that marriage only be recognized between a man and woman. I have a big desire to hang a big rainbow flag outside my home in full sight of his family. But instead, I think of him playing catch with his sons outside. I know that he's a committed and loving father. And so I focus on this, even as I hear his enormous flag, flapping in the wind.

If we can humanize others around us, it can lead to a lessening of our angst, anger, and distrust. But it requires anchoring ourselves. What do I mean by that? If we can feel secure enough in our own beliefs, a family member or friend thinking differently, doesn't have to cause upheaval in our sense of self. We can see that this is a separate human being who believes as they do, because of their upbringing, their life experiences, and this doesn't mean they are not caring or decent people. Really.

Now, there are many times when we can choose **not** to engage on problematic or controversial topics. I think that this can be a very wise way to maintain relationships especially if, one or both people, are very, very passionate about an issue. We can agree to disagree and decide that we won't talk about politics, religion, or world events. There are many other things we can engage in. We can talk about our children, food, wine, travel, hobbies, work, and our health. One is not limited to just talking about the weather. If we can embrace Nachman of Bratzlav's teaching of seeking out a point of goodness in those around us, then

there is no reason why we cannot continue to have a relationship with family and friends who view the world differently.

Now there may be times when we can talk with them, if we are rooted and emotionally calm. When I was at the CCAR conference, I also attended a session for rabbis wanting to deal with differing views on Israel. We were put in small groups and coached as we listened to our colleagues' feelings about Israel to respond with the following comments, "I notice that ...." "I appreciate that you are saying x." "I wonder about x." It was an interesting way to engage because it prevented us from arguing with each other and forced us to listen and comment in ways that brought us together. This was helpful because as you can imagine, even rabbis disagree on the issue of Israel, Gaza, and the direction of our country.

And so, what would it be like to respond to our uncle who thinks Trump is akin to the second coming of Christ, or our neighbor who believes that if Harris doesn't win, our country will become a dictatorship, "I notice that you are very worried about our country. I appreciate your strong views. I wonder how did you come to that conclusion?" And then, just listen. Sounds cray, cray, right but we may understand them more. We may find that they are willing to listen to our perspective. And we many find that we have other things in common.

And so, what I am getting at with this sermon is that we have a lot to lose by separating ourselves from others who view the world and our country differently. We lose out on perspectives. We lose out on understanding. And we lose people who can enrich our personal lives. I think we need as many loving and healthy relationships as possible with people from differing generations, political affiliation, and religious identities.

We can decide to disconnect from the furies on social media and meet up with people face to face. We can decide if it's best to engage on the hardest topics or to simply avoid them. If we all have the courage to engage on difficult topics, perhaps we can avoid the worst misunderstandings that are tearing our country and communities apart. Maybe, we can be the antidote. Maybe we can be the ones willing to reach out a hand of friendship and commonality. We can say that we care and that our relationship is deeper than our disagreement.

May we be able to see some goodness in those around us as we hope and pray for a good year ahead for us, our community, and our country.

**Notes:**

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[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/1bv13lm/whats\\_the\\_funniest\\_joke\\_youve\\_ever\\_heard/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/1bv13lm/whats_the_funniest_joke_youve_ever_heard/)

2 Eccl 1:19

3

<https://www.npr.org/2020/10/27/928209548/dude-i-m-done-when-politics-tears-families-and-friendships-apart>

**'Dude, I'm Done': When Politics Tears Families And Friendships Apart**

October 27, 2020 4:58 PM ET

4 Likutei Moharan I 34.