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“A Heart of Many Chambers,”

or “Let’s Have an Argument”

My dear teacher, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, loves to tell this story. He was a rabbinical student in New York, having come from a classical Reform background in Detroit and three years at the equally classical Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. One afternoon – this was the mid-Sixties - he was sitting in a little hole-in-the-wall milchig restaurant in the Lower East Side, parked at one of those Formica tables of yore, enjoying a bowl of borscht and working his way through a big tome of Talmud, trying to negotiate his Gemara assignment.

An older man with a just-off-the-boat hat and garb – and *accent* - was sitting a few tables away. There was practically no one else in the place. “Nu, young man,” said the onlooker, “I see you are a student.” “Yes,” said my future teacher, startled by the interruption in his train of thought. “So,” said the older man, “if you are a student, let’s have an argument.” “But I believe in God,” retorted the young Kushner, now thrown entirely off balance. “Okay,” said the old Jew, “so I don’t.”

It was as if the old fellow had invited the young Talmud student to a game of chess. “You want the white pieces? I’ll take the black.” Kushner simply didn’t understand the point at the time, but he used it later on as a standard example of religious dialogue within Judaism.

In some religions, I suppose, there is only one color of pieces in the game. Everyone plays one side of the board, or they can’t play at all. That’s also the case in many secular societies, where a certain expression of ideology constitutes patriotism, while any variation spells treason. Or in certain towns or neighborhoods, not unlike our own, where most people share a political and cultural point of view, and anyone who veers very far from the norm gets *politely* shunned.

In Judaism – at least in the Judaism created by Hillel and Shammai and Yohanan ben Zakkai and Akiva and Ishmael and Yehuda Hanasi – there is simply no “belief” without a back-and-forth discussion; without an argument, a “*mahloket*,” literally a “parting” between two sides, one *helek* and another *helek*, thus a *mahloket*.

Here is the locus classicus of this great Jewish idea, in Pirkey Avot in the Mishnah: *kol mahloket shehi l'shem shamayim, sofah l'hitkayem*; Any argument that is for the sake of Heaven, in the end it will succeed; *kol mahloket she-lo l'shem shamayim, any sofah l'hitkayem*; any argument not for the sake of Heaven will in the end not succeed.

Now, “succeed” is not exactly what the text says. It says *l'hitkayem*. That term carries the sense of “existing,” as in “the argument will continue to exist.” What can this mean?

Rabbi Amy Eilberg, leading us through five days of texts on conflict resolution at a rabbis' and cantors' retreat this past summer, suggested the following: An argument fought for the sake of Heaven – i.e. for ultimate Truth and Goodness – will in fact *never* end. It will never cease to exist. It will continue to generate more and more Torah of truth and goodness, for as long as the parties stay in the game and continue to argue in good faith, trusting one another not to try and pull a fast one and “win” the argument. As long as both parties push each other toward a truth that is greater and more profound than any small-minded agenda either party

could bring to the table, then the argument itself – the *mahloket* – will keep producing holy meaning, holy energy.

In serious Judaism, we don't "resolve" good important arguments. We keep them going. Without our arguments, *we* would cease to exist, not as human beings, of course, but certainly as Jews.

Let's raise the stakes. Here's a harder text. This is from the Tosefta, which was sort of an early beta version of the Mishnah:

One may say to oneself, "since the House of Shammai says 'impure' and the House of Hillel says 'pure' - one prohibits and one permits - why should I continue to learn Torah?" Therefore the Torah says, *d'varim, had'varim, eleh had'varim* – "words, the words, these are the words." All the words were given by a single Shepherd, one God created them, one Provider gave them, the Blessed Ruler of all creation spoke them. **Therefore make your heart into a many-chambered room**, *lev hadrey hadarim*, and bring into it both the words of the House of

Shammai and the words of the House of Hillel, both the words of those who forbid and the words of those who permit. [Tosefta Sotah 7:12]

Now for some context. There's a long tradition of these Hillel-Shammai "controversies," going back to the 1st century BCE founders of these two opposing schools of Rabbinic Judaism. One school is supposedly more liberal, while the other comes off as "strict constructionist," to employ an anachronism. Yet it's the juxtaposition of the two schools, rather than the eclipse of one by the other, that largely shapes and colors the Judaism we inherited from the Rabbis. Clearly the Rabbis wanted this "controversy" or *mahloket* style to typify their Judaism. They even invented an Aramaic term for their tennis-match or chess-match style of studying Torah: *shakla v'tarya*. Give and take. Parry and thrust.

And clearly the Rabbis wanted Hillel's gentle and inclusive approach to "win" most of the time, and thus set the halakhic standard for the future, but not to win in a way that would end the discussion. What was supposed to "win" was Hillel's *tone*. Thus, in another Talmudic passage [Eruvin 13b] we read, "Why was the law set according to the House of Hillel? Because they were gentle and humble (*nohin v'aluvim hayu*) and they taught both their own words and the words of the House of

Shammai. And not only this, but they taught the words of the house of Shammai before their own.”

In our Tosefta passage, the speaker expresses frustration over the seeming futility of continuing the *mahloket*. If one always says yes and the other always says no, then what’s the point? If the two sides never see eye to eye, then why go on learning Torah? Why not abandon the whole Jewish enterprise?

Their answer is subtle. The anonymous collective voice of the Rabbis says, in effect, “I get your dilemma. But you’re looking for the wrong kind of resolution to these arguments. The answer is not in the yea or nay, but in the relationship created by the two sides as a result of hanging in. The resolution happens when the dominant side incorporates the needs and worries of the weaker side into its own argument. And furthermore, victory is achieved for everyone when both sides continue to recognize the legitimacy and sincerity of their counterparts.”

In the end, says this text, each of us has many chambers in our heart, i.e. in our capacity to integrate multiple concepts and emotions. If we are to have any hope

of continuing as a people, we'll need to implore each person to use all of those storage rooms to incorporate the many conflicting "words" that ultimately flow from the same unique source, i.e. from the Creator of every *thing*, every *word*.

And don't forget the important pun that Biblical Hebrew offers us when it employs the same word for 'word' as it does for 'thing' or 'item,' namely *davar*. Language pushes us to think of words as something real. D'varim are d'varim: Words are things. Words matter. Words create worlds. Words can hurt and words can heal. *And words that you disagree with come from the same source as the words you concur with!*

Therefore, "make your heart a heart of many chambers" in order to absorb a multiplicity of arguments, ideas, opinions – and in order to remain open to morphing your position before it ossifies and you lose all hope.

We would do well to get our entire Jewish people to make our collective heart a "heart of many chambers" a *lev hadrey hadarim*. I say this not because I believe we have lost civility in our dialogue across the many streams and factions of

Jewish life. Rather, I say it because I think that in our effort to create a more civil tone in the Jewish world (and in the larger world, too), we've begun to shy away from *any* dialogue, any true *mahloket*. We quickly hush up crucial dissent about Israel, about our relationship to American and world politics, about deep matters of faith (or our crises of faith), about the shifting boundaries of Jewish identity, and the rapid morphing of the very *meaning* of Jewish identity among our youngest Jews.

About the last thing we would want to bequeath to our next generation is a Jewish people who can't bear to hear each other's heartfelt opinions. Indeed, a Jew who separates him- or herself from the community may be dallying with treason, but Jews who argue from an existential core of identification and love should not be silenced in the name of unity, or of civility.

And, my fellow American northeastern liberal New York Democratic upper middle class two-advanced-degree secular-leaning Zionist-but-not-religious-Zionist civil libertarian Reconstructionists, I'm not only preaching to *them*, the Jews who don't fall into the ten or so key categories I just rattled off. I'm talking to us as well. I'm saying that *we* have more or less stopped contributing to the *mahloket* because

we find it too frustrating and too impolite. Or too dangerous. Or too threatening, too apt to make us take stands where we've been able to avoid taking a stand.

I believe we should use the Hillel-Shammai model to retrieve a vibrant Torah of dialogue about crucial subject matter – a dialogue that stays polite and civil, but that goes *beyond politeness and civility toward true speaking and listening*.

That would be a *mahloket* in which AIPAC people and J-Street people would have lively debates defined by great gulfs of belief and policy, but even greater feelings of mutual trust and a shared dream. That would be a *mahloket* in which young campus Jews on two sides of the occupation question could come together for Shabbat dinner, and perhaps band together to stand against those on campus who seek to delegitimize the Jewish people's national liberation movement with their insidious "BDS," or "boycott, divestment, sanction." For sure, BDS relies on creating a sordid caricature of Israel, but one which, in our current stifling of true dialogue, becomes more and more difficult to debunk, and more and more compelling for our young adults to believe, heaven forbid.

Now you know our young adult Jews. You know them well. You raised them. You should be proud of them. They have fully absorbed the humanitarian values and ideas we breathed into them. They believed us when we taught them that the core of Torah was *v'ahavta l'reyacha kamocho*, “love your neighbor as yourself.” They did less well getting our message about *pikuah nefesh*, the principle that survival takes precedence over most other commandments.

Therefore, when they see such things as a shutting down of dissent about Israel’s settlement policy, or a reluctance to deal with the lack of spiritual vitality in our shuls and schools, or our tendency toward pat answers about core religious and political issues, they fail to see in these matters the threats to Jewish survival that we older folks tend to see. Unless we quickly bring our kids into a vibrant “heart of many rooms” dialogue about what bothers them and us, we will have no more Jewish legacy to bequeath.

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I know that everyone spends at least ten minutes at their Rosh Hashanah lunch talking about their rabbi’s sermon. Invariably, you will ask each other if your rabbi addressed the hot-button issue of the moment, whatever it happens to be. I think you can tell from my presentation up to this point that I believe we face hot-

button issues much greater than the Park51 controversy, which everyone hopes their rabbi will at least mention.

But let's for a moment put *that* discussion into the context of my *mahloket l'shem shamayim* framework. I personally signed petitions supporting the right of the Muslims to build their center on Park Street without fear of scorn or reprisal. My argument is that defending their right represents the absolute best of American principles. That feeling stems from my deep belief that the United States is every bit as much a "concept" as it is a "country" in the traditional sense. But because it is also a country, it needs to defend itself. I believe that the Islamic center poses no bodily threat – and no political threat, either - and therefore does not put into play our *pikuah nefesh* clause, our survival factor.

I also believe that anti-Muslim slurs and fear-mongering are terribly wrong, not because they're uncivil, but because they're immoral. They go against our every belief in seeing the *tzelem elohim* or "image of God" in all persons, and our commitment to avoid making others "the other." And groups I belong to issued

statements to that effect as well. I'm proud to have weighed in publicly on the side I think is right.

That said, I fully believe that the project came about in a spirit of bad faith, of obfuscation, of dissembling. I say this as someone very involved in the New York Board of Rabbis, who are at the forefront of interfaith dialogue in the most religiously diverse metropolitan area in the world, and as one who therefore knows more than he wants to about the back-story. At its best, this project was a missed opportunity to make a statement of positive identification with the multivalent religious tradition in American culture. At worst, it was a cynical testing of our Constitutional gumption.

We will pass that test. The center will be built on its intended site, or at least not far away. Good things will be done there in the name of the best of Islamic values and American values. And I have no doubt that great *interfaith* work will come about on that site as well. But our good will was depleted in the process.

And, as you see, most Americans have not been able to pose as Hillel to the other's Shammai. Civil libertarians – that's my side - smirk at the small-minded jingoism of the opposers. Opposers mock the snobbishly insensitive smugness of those of us who would put something as abstract as constitutional law before their own offended sensibilities. So, all *shakla* but no *tarya*. All thrust and no parry. All talk and no listening. No one valuing their beloved opponent's point of view, their opponent's pain, their opponent's longing for truth.

Enough on the mosque, whether or not it's a mosque, at Ground Zero, whether or not it's at Ground Zero. Trust me, if this had been resolved by August 1, rabbis would be expected to address the *next* burning issue on Rosh Hashanah morning, whatever it would have been.

And I think I know what that “next thing” should be: to explore how our influential American Jewish community can get behind Prime Minister Bibi and give him the courage to defy his right flank and extend the moratorium on settlement-building past the middle of Sukkot, at least to give the other side no ground to back out of these fragile, precious talks. Although I recognize that some of you will certainly want to make a cogent argument against my position! I personally believe your

opinion to be dangerous for Israel and world Jewry, BUT I believe the squelching of your argument to be even MORE dangerous. So I will listen, and I know you will do the same.

Here's my rule of thumb for the New Year. First, when approaching someone with an obviously different approach to an issue dear to your heart, say *lamdeini*.

“Teach me. Teach me what you're doing, and why.” That is, start by assuming that the other person has thought it through.

Second, follow the dictum of the Rabbis. Give your opponents *kaf z'chut*. “The benefit of the doubt.” Assume they are no less sincere than you are, and that they are made from the same “stuff” as you, the *tzelem elohim*, that “divine image” imbedded in every cell of our bodies.

Third, be brave enough to say *sh'ma kolenu*, “hear our voice.” Politely, civilly, lovingly, constructively, honestly, *make your voice heard*. Look the other *panim el panim*, “divine face to divine face,” and say what needs to be said.

So: *Lamdeni* – “teach me.” *Kaf z’chut* – “benefit of the doubt.” *Sh’ma kolenu* – “hear our voice.” And in every listening and telling and listening again, *lev hadrey hadarim* –keep open the many chambers of our heart.

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Rosh Hashanah lunch beckons. We still have shofar blasts to sound, and to *listen* to. *To sound and to listen*. So take this last text as a parting challenge for us in our new year. This is from the 4th century Babylonian rabbi, Mar bar Rabina. His little meditation has become *the* preferred prayer to be spoken thrice daily as a closing to the Amidah. It is a prayer that we would find a way to speak from - and listen with - our heart:

Elohai n’tzor l’shoni me-ra

God guard my tongue from evil

U’s’fatai midaber mirma

And my lips from speaking falsehood

V’lim’kal’lai nafshi tidom

And let me be tranquil toward those who fling curses at me

V'nafshi ka'afar lakol tihyeh

Let me be humble as dust to all who need me

P'tach libi b'toratecha

Open the chambers of my heart to your Torah

U'v'mitzvotecha tir'dof nafshi

Let my soul run to do your holy deeds

V'chol hahoshvim alai ra'ah m'heyrah hafer atzatom v'kalkel mahashavtam

Let all who bear me animosity be brought quickly to reconsider their ill-will

Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'hegyon libi l'fanecha

May my words of prayer, the meditations in the chambers of my heart be seen favorably, my precious one, my rock and champion.

Ado-nai tzuri v'go'ali