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One could argue that the climax of our unsettling Rosh Hashanah morning Torah reading is the moment the angel stopped Abraham from slaughtering Isaac. It's quite dramatic. Isaac is bound on the altar, on his back. Abraham is standing over him, knife in hand, the knife's point at Isaac's throat. And then an angel implores Abraham to lay the knife aside. A ram for the sacrifice suddenly appears. Abraham unties Isaac and both return from the top of Mount Moriah, Isaac unscathed.

On Rosh Hashanah's past, I have shared examples of our sages' discomfort with this Torah portion. Their discomfort, mirroring our own, is of course understandable. After all, even though Abraham didn't actually kill his son, he was prepared to; he held a knife to his own son's throat, ready to drive it in.

I recently reread, in my rabbinical school thesis, a medieval rabbinic commentary on this story called Midrash Vayosha that makes it even worse. Midrash Vayosha contends that when that angel appeared to Abraham to stop him from slitting Isaac's throat, calling out to Abraham with the words "Do not lay your hand upon the boy", Abraham replied to the angel by saying, "I will not slaughter him. But please, just let me wound him. Just let me draw some blood. Please, let me do something to him!" The angel then sternly replied, "Do not do anything to the boy!" As if Abraham, after working himself into the kind of insane frenzy that would bring him to the point of murdering his own son; as if, so caught up in his blind passion, that even a voice from On High couldn't get Abraham to willingly change course. Abraham was lost in his fanatical determination to do what he had set out to do, no matter how insane or demonic. In Midrash Vayosha's reading of this tale you can even sense Abraham's disappointment when the angel stopped him.

It's troubling to read such a dark tale about the founder of our people. And yet we know how true-to-life Abraham's actions were. We know that this is what happens when blind arrogant passion trumps sanity and compassion. We know that this is what happens to those who believe that they possess the absolute truth. They can refuse to see the pain, and the damage, their fanaticism causes. And if people are hurt by their determination to impose their will on the rest of us, well....the rest of us are either wrong, immoral, evil, or just unfortunate collateral damage.

We read the story of Abraham and Isaac at the edge of a New Year when the public square is filled with influential voices that also know they are absolutely right; that their opponents are absolutely wrong; all they seem to care about is

winning. Turn on MSNBC or Fox News any evening and you'll find them there, speaking confidently and simplistically, calling those who disagree stupid, treasonous, un-American, terrorists or alien.

This Rosh Hashanah, the public square might best be described as walled off into different camps, Republicans and Democrats. Tea Party activists and Liberals. Each barricaded in their own corner. Each arguing that those who disagree with them are destroying the country. They believe that you must not listen to opposing voices because even the act of listening, is an act of treachery. No need to calibrate their positions according to the alternative ideas other reasonable voices might raise. What is needed is victory, what is needed is blood.

Imagine two congressional leaders from opposing parties, or perhaps Karl Rove and James Carville, appearing together on CNN, and one turning to the other and saying, "That was very insightful. I hadn't thought about that. I'm changing my position on this issue based on what you just said." Imagine Keith Obermann and Sean Hannity uttering those words to each other. Don't hold your breath. And if our fellow citizens, even the poor, the elderly and the vulnerable, are hurt by their actions---it's obviously the other guy's fault.

The Talmud records a debate between two great sages, Akiva and Ben Azzai. The question at hand is: which is the most important verse in the Torah. Akiva contends it is "v'ahavta l'reyecha camocha, Love your neighbor as yourself". Love, Akiva teaches, is the most important positive command. Ben Azzai disagrees and replies to Akiva by saying: "You say that the word 'love' is the most important word in this verse, but I say the most important word is 'neighbor.' And what," he asks Akiva, "if your neighborhood is very small? What if you are surrounded by people who hate? What if you live in a neighborhood where all your neighbors are just like you? It's easy to love people who look, act, think and believe, and even hate, just as you do.

Here is a contemporary example of Ben Azzai's concern. Consider the governor of Texas. Let's say he believes that only through prayer to Jesus, imploring Jesus to fill our nation, can we be redeemed from our current economic woes. Let's say he believes that anybody who denies the authority of Christ will go directly to Hell. Then he calls a prayer meeting at a large stadium. And thousands of people who believe just as he does, show up. And he summons the crowd to pray to Jesus to fix our economy, because only Jesus can. As the Governor of Texas looks out at that sea of people, he might feel validated. "I'm right, of course," he might think, "look at all people who have come to agree with me!"

He might never acknowledge, even to himself, how alienating such rhetoric might sound to the rest of us. Because he has walled off his neighborhood, keeping this country's great mosaic of belief and culture and varied traditions locked

outside. If you're the governor of Texas, in that stadium, it's easy to love your neighbor.

According to Ben Azzai, the most important verse in the Torah comes from the creation story we will hear tomorrow morning: that every person was created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image. Every person. Even people who have different world-views, different beliefs, each one of us, God's very handiwork. Ben Azzai taught that if you recognize God's image within people who are different from you, and you love them as you love your neighbor, then you have indeed lived according to the Torah's most important words.

It's not that all arguments are wrongheaded. Disagreement, honestly engaging others, especially those we love, over matters of importance is crucial to any healthy relationship. And debate over how to solve the daunting challenges we face in this country is essential to our national interest. The question is: HOW to argue. And HOW to listen.

Alas, we need these high holy days every year because we know that it isn't only politicians who suffer from such righteous blindness; if we are honest with ourselves, we know that we all occasionally fall into this same trap.

When we get into an argument with our spouse, our children, our parents, our friends, do we listen to what they have to say? Or are we only interested in scoring points? When we are in the heat of that moment, do we turn our own family into rivals, determined to annihilate them, because, at that moment, what matters most is winning?

I often have couples in my study, talking right past each other. They might as well be in different rooms. They have no interest in hearing the other side. In connecting with the other person's feelings and pain, and fears and dreams. And they have no intention of sincerely owning any fault at all.

And the most common complaint I hear from kids is that their parents don't listen to them. And sometimes when adult children talk to me about their arguments with their elderly parents, their comments are laced with impatience, ingratitude, and condescension.

Jewish tradition calls a healthy argument a *makhloket l'shem shamayim*, a *disagreement for the sake of heaven*. The example the Talmud gives is the series of disagreements between two ancient sages, Hillel and Shammai.

Hillel and Shammai disagreed about everything. And in almost every case, the Talmud resolves their disagreement in Hillel's favor. And it wasn't that Shammai didn't make good arguments, reasonable arguments, even, occasionally, brilliant arguments. He did. And in many cases, you could even see that Shammai's case was actually better. But the Talmud teaches that Hillel always spoke to

Shammai with respect and humility, that Hillel always began his argument by quoting Shammai's position first. David Wolpe teaches that the Talmud recorded these disputes between Hillel and Shammai---not to show who was right, or who was the winner. In fact, winning wasn't the point at all. It was, rather, to ask what kind of person do I want to be at the conclusion of this argument? Will I be a person who sought to achieve reconciliation and healing and positive change? A person willing to compromise, and even concede? A person willing to learn, and to grow? Or the person who got to walk away with the swagger of a victor? Because Hillel modeled listening, mutual respect, humility and compromise, the Talmud teaches that he engaged in arguments *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven.

Now, in case any of you are thinking that I'm advocating collapsing our moral spine, I am not. And highlighting the importance of humility and decency in our discourse doesn't mean that we compromise on our core values, especially when it comes to protecting the most vulnerable among us: the poor children, the elderly, and especially when it comes to promoting dignity and justice for all citizens. And we here at temple will continue to ask you to join us in the struggle for social justice, fighting vigorously and passionately when necessary. Nor do I mean, God forbid, that we shrink from our responsibility to vanquish the terrorists who literally do want to draw blood.

But that doesn't mean people of any political persuasion have to treat their opponents in disputes on policy as enemies, and call them names, questioning their patriotism, their faith, or treat them as idiots. All who claim to be fighting for dignity, should act with dignity, should speak with dignity, and should model the values they claim to be fighting for.

And can it really be possible that in national budget talks, or with Social Security, or Medicare, or tax policy---or even how to protect our country against terror and defeat the terrorists---that one side has all the answers?

And most important: Is it possible for us to create a political climate where we reward our leaders for actually solving problems, instead of angling for the election cycle.

Nor do I mean to suggest that in our personal relationships, we should become doormats. Dignity also means standing up for ourselves, insisting on being treated with respect, and kindness and fairness. But if we want to resolve our problems, and to achieve some peace between us, we have to be willing to listen, to be honest with ourselves, to compromise, and to speak in a way that ensures that we will be heard.

Rosh Hashanah makes the boldest of claims: that we are never trapped in the unhealthy patterns that seem to drive our relationships into the ground, and that

seem to hold our public and private discourse captive to venom. We need not continue on the path of Abraham's plea, "can I just draw some blood, please?"

Rather, as we begin the year 5772, we can look to Hillel, who was able to find something of worth in the other person's perspective. We can act with more humility, and less pretense. With less shouting, and more listening, and hearing, and reflecting, and honesty.

We can make finding solutions and finding our way to reconciliation and love and trust more important than winning.