

Kol Nidre 5779-2018
Sitting at the same table
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

“My summer vacation.”

Remember those essays we had to write for English class, the first week back at school: “What I learned over my summer vacation?” Ugh! I hated those essays.

And yet, here I stand, voluntarily having composed my 2018 version of what I learned over my summer vacation. Ms. Glass, my 5th grade English teacher, is somewhere, in this world or the next, smiling a satisfied smile.

I spent my summer vacation, “down the shore,” as locals refer to the Jersey shore. It was pretty near close to perfect: sun, sea, walks in the surf, coffee and drinks with good friends on cool summer evenings, a lot of family time with children and grandchildren visiting often, but not too often. Many of you commented to me on my return how “relaxed” I looked. It made me wonder, “Do I look that uptight normally?”

One of the things I love about the shore, is that they are old style communities where people spend a lot of time outside, on their porches. People are friendly and take the time to get to know one another. It was not at all unusual for us to be sitting having coffee on our porch and someone would stop by introduce themselves and sit for a while with us.

The one neighbor I didn’t meet was the one who lived directly behind us. Imagine my surprise when I learned that I shared a backyard fence with...Kelley Ann Conway and her husband George and their family.

Who knows why we did not bump into each other, maybe they were too busy to come down much this summer, maybe when they did come down they used their front door which went out on a different street. I don’t know, but I did give the matter some thought as to what I would do if I did bump into her.

Some of you might remember the incident when Sarah Huckabee Sanders, President Trump’s White House Press Secretary, took a night off to have dinner at the Red Hen a 26-seat farm to table restaurant in Lexington, Virginia this summer. Not long after she and her party sat down, the owner of the restaurant arrived and asked Sanders to leave, citing Sanders efforts to represent and defend the Trump administration’s separating of thousands of migrant children from their parents at the southern U.S. border.

On the one hand, that does not seem very hospitable behavior. On the other hand, those who defend the owner’s actions say we live in dangerous times and these are life and death issues and values that cut to the core of our national identity, and these concerns should and must take precedence over normal gestures of courtesy and kindness. On Rosh Hashana I spoke how for too many Americans on the left and the right civility has become a luxury in times of such critical differences.

But tonight, although concerned with Kelley Ann, I am more concerned with you and me. Tonight, I would like to focus on this tension as it plays out in the Jewish community.

American Jews and Israeli Jews are confronting a similar quandary with respect to our continued relationship. Over the summer Natan Scharansky and Gil Troy wrote a seminal

essay titled: "Can American and Israeli Jews Stay together as One People?" The strains over politics and religious recognition have caused some to question prospects for a shared Jewish future.

Many of us have experienced and all of us have witnessed the most outrageous behavior by ultra-orthodox Jews towards those who seek to practice what is normative Judaism here in America. Women of the Wall try to simply conduct their own prayer service, include women in their prayer experience, and they are spat on and shouted down in the most offensive language one can imagine. Attending one of these *Rosh Hodesh* Services, I asked one of these black-coated protesters how they could justify such behavior against a fellow human, let alone a fellow Jew. He responded, "people who behave this way are neither Jews, nor human and don't deserve to be treated as such!"

Whether or not to play nice was the same question that occupied my mind as I stood in my back yard this summer and tried to prepare myself in the event that Kelly Ann Conway came out into her back yard. Does civility trump passion? Does courtesy continue to rule even in times like these? That Ultra-Orthodox Jew I met in Israel didn't think so. The owner of the restaurant that Sarah Huckabee Sanders went to didn't think so. Do you?

As I was standing in my back yard, ready to flip my burgers on the grill, my thoughts wandered to Hillel and Shammai. (Yeah, I'm a lot of fun at parties...)

I had recently read a lovely essay by my good friend and rabbi Steven Moskowitz. And what I was reminded of was not only of Hillel and Shammai's wisdom but also, their relationship. Hillel and Shammai were seminal figures in the creation of the Mishna, the law compendium that has shaped and guided Judaism for the past 2000 years. The Talmud is not so much a law code as it is an ongoing record of conversation and debate that took place in the academies of ancient Israel and Babylonia. And the debates of Hillel and Shammai on matters of ritual practice, ethics, and theology literally shaped much of the Judaism we practice today.

For example all of us are familiar with lighting of the Hanukkah menorah, but you may be unaware that you do it the way you do because that was the way Hillel did it. Shammai thought we should begin with 8 candles on the first night and light one less each successive night. And so it went on issue after issue, argument after argument, Hillel and Shammai and the schools they founded stood on opposite sides of virtually every issue they faced. Beit Shammai insisted that only the worthiest students should be admitted into their academy; Beit Hillel believed that any student who wanted to study torah should be admitted. Beit Shammai insisted that divorce could only be justified for the most serious of infractions of the marital relationship; Beit Hillel disagreed and argued that marriage is a relationship - -and where there is no relationship, even if it is disrupted over the most mundane of matters, there is no marriage. And on and on it went, they disagreed about EVERYTHING.

There were times that passions became so inflamed that the followers came to resent each other and in one documented case it even led to violence. There was an incident where the Zealots sided with the School of Shammai in a crucial debate and placed armed guards at the door and even killed some of the Hillelites so the vote would go according to Beit Shammai. The Talmud refers to this event as a day of great misfortune. (Shabbat 13a)

Are we Jews headed to such a day of great misfortune as well?

Fortunately, the Zealots did not get the final word, and the day of misfortune did not become more than a day. Maybe the excess of violence shocked the more reasonable leaders on both sides to calm things down but we know that they changed course and the Mishna in Yevamot (1:4) describes a very different ending to the Hillel and Shammai story. The Mishna declares that they found a way to live with each other and even though they disagreed on issues of marriage, this did not stop them from marrying one another and even though they disagreed over matters concerning the kashrut of certain dishes, this did not stop them from eating with one another.

My friends I have come to teach you the torah of Hillel and Shammai on this sacred evening because I fear we as a country and we as a people are headed for our own day of great misfortune if we continue the path we are on.

A recent study of millennials indicated that an increasing number would refuse to marry someone from the opposing political party. If a Democrat will not marry a Republican and a Republican will not marry a Democrat, then we have become sects.

And so it is with American and Israeli Jews. How long can Conservative and Reform rabbis be expected to fight the delegitimization of Israel when Israel's chief rabbinate delegitimizes us, and our religious Movements? And Israeli's are losing patience as well; they chafe when liberal American Jews call Israel a disappointment and an embarrassment. As one Israeli government official said recently: "the Israel that American Jews want can exist only in their heads and their pursuit of that delusion have made them our biggest enemies – their attacks are free gifts to Israel's delegitimizers.

The more readily American Jewish liberals voice apocalyptic statements about the death of Israeli democracy, the more readily Israelis write off liberal American Jews as a population cowed by anti-Israel propaganda and in any case doomed to diminishment, if not extinction, through wholesale assimilation."

One sadly typical exchange that Sharansky and Troy cite from this past year - three years after the 2014 war in Gaza, a liberal American Jew, still appalled by the "disproportionate" numbers of casualties in that conflict, told a group of Knesset members visiting Boston: "You are losing me . . . and many, many people in the Jewish community... I cannot look the other way when three Israeli teenagers are brutally murdered, and the response is to kill 2,300 Palestinians."

Needless to say, the visiting Knesset Members, from left to right, saw things otherwise. They still remembered thousands of Hamas missiles sending millions of Israelis into shelters for weeks, and were fully acquainted with the difficulties faced by Israel's soldiers in defending their fellow citizens against an enemy that used its own citizens as human shields. One Knesset Member heatedly replied: "If I have to choose between losing more lives of Israelis, whether they are civilians or soldiers, and losing you, I will sadly, and would sorrowfully, rather lose you."

A video of this exchange, barely noticed in the U.S., went viral in Israel. There, it was taken as Exhibit A of American Jewish ignorance and self-righteousness.

I remember a conversation I was having with a college student – who couldn't understand why Israel just doesn't do "the right thing," and give Palestinians their state without condition – and

trust that things will work out for the best. “Do you realize,” I asked, “that if you are wrong, you are asking Israelis to commit national suicide?” “That,” she replied, “is a chance I am willing to take.” It may be a chance she is willing to take, but can we really blame Israelis who are not willing to take such a chance? And, when they understand that growing numbers of American Jews are willing to play Russian roulette with their survival – well the distance between us grows larger and larger.

Yossi Klein Halevi – who has spoken from this bema, the Israeli author and writer, is desperately trying to bridge this chasm. His most recent book, “Letters to my Palestinian Neighbor,” is his latest attempt to reach out across the abyss. I once heard him give a lecture suggesting there are two types of Jews: Purim Jews and Passover Jews. He insists that Jewish history speaks to *our* generation in the voice of two biblical commands to remember. The first voice commands us to remember that we were strangers in the land of Egypt, and the message is: Don’t be brutal. This was at the heart of my Rosh Hashanah sermon on kindness.

But, what I neglected to tell you on Rosh Hashanah is that Judaism also begs us to remember Amalek – Remember how the tribe of Amalek attacked us while we were wandering in the desert, without provocation, attacking from the rear killing the most vulnerable, our women and children, and the message of this command to remember, says Yossi is: Don’t be naïve. There is evil in this world, and all the kindness in the world will not win them over; all the politeness and sweet talk will not deter those whose hearts are so filled with hate.

The first command, to remember, is the voice of Passover, of liberation; the second, is the voice of Purim, which commemorates our victory over the genocidal threat of Haman, a descendant of Amalek. “Passover Jews” are motivated by empathy with the oppressed; Purim Jews” are motivated by alertness to threat.

What seems clear to me, is that more and more the voice of American Jews is the voice of Passover. We give sermons, as I did on Rosh Hashanah, about kindness and the need to reach out and engage those who are different from us.

And it is equally clear, that the more and more, the voice of Israeli Jews is the voice of Purim. They laugh at our naïveté over the harshness of the world and the evil it contains.

One reason that the Palestinian issue is so wrenching for Jews is that it is the point on which these two commands of our history converge, argues Klein-Halevi. Remember the stranger, says Passover. But in Israel 2018, the stranger in our midst, is represented by a national movement that wants to destroy us! The stranger, to whom our tradition commands us to extend kindness, does not return the good wishes and seeks not to live with us, but to live without us, and to wipe us from the face of the earth.

And so here we stand in 2018 – Israeli Jews and American Jews, on opposite sides of an enormous divide. We are appalled by the harshness of our fellow Jews in Israel and they are equally appalled by our naïveté and refusal to see the world as it is. We are celebrating Passover and they are observing Purim.

And we feel the pressure to choose. Either we stand with the cause of the suffering Palestinian or we stand with our brothers and sisters in Israel. Either we side with Hillel or we side with Shammai. Either we are Republicans or we are Democrats. And once we choose, the other side becomes the enemy, and God help me if I extend any kindness or sympathy to Kelly Ann

Conway the next time she appears in her back yard.

We come to shul this Yom Kippur 5779 and *we* are convinced we are right and *they* are wrong, and we are not sure where to go from there. We stand on opposites of a chasm, that much is clear. We shout at those on the other side. We have such anger towards them, those on the other side; they will destroy everything. And too many of us are more interested in gathering stones to throw at them than trying to build bridges to reach out to them.

What are we to do?

Well the first thing we could do is acknowledge that *they* are as frustrated with us as much as we are frustrated with them.

And the fact that we are so angry with them, well that should make us sad. The fact that the chasm exists, well, that should be a cause for agony, and not joy. It was for Hillel and Shammai.

I fear that in too many synagogues on this Yom Kippur Day, rabbis will deliver sermons that stir the pot rather than calm the waters. In too many synagogues rabbis will deliver the sermons that their congregants will want to hear, rather than the ones they need to hear.

Do you know how easy it would have been for me to stand here and decry the injustice of religious discrimination in Israel against Jews like us? I am sure most of you would enjoy it more than the sermon I have chosen to give you. But, what then? We go home, feeling good about ourselves, the chasm is still a chasm and we have a few less stones to throw.

Imagine if all rabbis, in all synagogues gave the sermon their congregants needed to hear?

Imagine an Orthodox rabbi, a supporter of the settlers in Hebron, delivered the following sermon to his congregation instead: "My friends, our community has sinned against Israel. For all our devotion to the Jewish state and our concern for its survival, we have failed to acknowledge the consequences to Israel's soul of occupying another people against its will."

And imagine a liberal rabbi, a supporter of J Street, telling his congregation: "My friends, our community has sinned against Israel. For all our devotion to the Jewish state and our concern for its democratic values, we have failed to acknowledge the urgency of the existential threat once again facing our people."

Do you think that is possible? It was certainly not made easier by the tragic death of Ari Fuld z"l who lived in Efrat and was murdered at Gush Etzion by a Palestinian terrorist this past week. I fear that tragedies like this only make the two sides more self-righteous as it gets harder and harder to reach across the abyss. I might have argued with Ari Fuld had I met him. But, he was my family – and his murder hurts, it pains me deeply.

You see, I believe that is only when we can internalize, or at the very least acknowledge each other's anxieties that we can we hope to bridge the chasm and begin to build bridges instead of throwing stones at one another. Politicians and rabbis are very good at preaching to the converted. Maybe, like Hillel and Shammai, we need to be shocked at how far things have gone and start asking where do we go from here?

I am not telling you not to have passion for what you believe in. Choose sides! Nothing is more pathetic than a person without convictions. We laugh at the rabbi from Fiddler on the Roof – the one who says: “Your right to opposite positions and when it is pointed out that they can’t both be right – he says – your right!” I want you to have strong opinions – God knows, I do.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter the famous 19th century Lithuanian Rabbi famously said (in the gendered language of his day): “A rabbi whose community does not disagree with him, is no rabbi, a rabbi who fears his community is no man.”

No, I do not worry that you will disagree with me, that’s what we Jews do. Since the days of Hillel and Shammai, disagreement and argumentation is the very stuff out of which our way of life is built.

What Rabbi Salanter was pointing too, and what Hillel and Shammai understood, is that our disagreements cannot be allowed to separate us. Once we no longer speak to those with whom we disagree, once we stop liking or respecting those on the “other side,” the debate has gone to far. That is the moment we must put down the stones and start building bridges.

I have strong views when it comes to Israel. I am pained by the current state of Israeli politics (as I am with American politics). The Hareidization of the Jewish religion in Israel – where only the most right wing of religious views are considered kosher is a source of enormous pain and disappointment to me. But, I am still taking a Temple Beth Sholom Trip to Israel this February – and I hope you will join us, as we will embrace the miracle that is modern day Israel in all of its complexity and contradictions.

I believe that there are Israelis who understand my pain, as I seek to understand theirs. While many of those black-coated Israelis do not, I know that many Israelis do, and they are the ones we need to reach out to. And while I believe that the occupation is destroying the Jewish soul, I know there are many Israeli’s who share my concern and they are as frustrated by their lack of alternatives as I am. It is time for those of us in Israel and America who understand one another and feel each other’s pain, it is time to reach out to each other and stop letting the extremes set the agenda. The black-coated Hasid I tried to speak to at the kotel, the one who refused to see me as a fellow Jew, he was wrong, I am his family.

What is that famous quote by Harper Lee from “To Kill A Mockingbird,” “You can choose your friends but you sho' can't choose your family, an' they're still kin to you no matter whether you acknowledge 'em or not, and it makes you look right silly when you don't.”

We are family and family are people you are stuck with. They are here for the whole ride – so you might as well figure out how to live with them.

I spend a good deal of my time navigating family issues. As a rabbi, the moments you are most likely to see me, are precisely those family moments that can be, well challenging: a wedding, a Bar Mitzvah, a funeral. We are able to insulate ourselves pretty well in our daily routine from those family members who annoy us, aggravate us, are not nice to us. But there is no avoiding them at a wedding. “I have not spoken to my brother in 10 years, and we will both be at mom’s funeral, rabbi, what should I do. Or “rabbi can we have separate unveilings, I really don’t want to deal with my sister.”

The chasms that separate us grow wider and wider from day to day and year to year until we stop and stare at the abyss that separates us and wonder –how did we ever get this far apart.

Let me teach you a phrase from the Talmud. It is from the tractate of Shevuot 39a. The rabbis teach: *kol yisrael areyvim zeh lazeh*, which most people translate: All Jews (*kol yisrael*) are responsible (*areyvim*) for one another (*zeh lazeh*). Jews are expected; Jews are required, to care for each other. There is an alternate version of this quote, which goes: *kol yisrael areyvim ze bazeh* - instead of *zeh lazeh*. What is the difference – *zeh la zeh* or *zeh bazeh*? Although the two expressions differ in only one letter, they may have somewhat different meanings. It is a play on the Hebrew word *areyvim* which can mean responsible, or it can also mean “mixed up,” they are homonyms. *Kol Yisrael Areyvim Zeh lazeh* – teaches that all Jews are responsible for each other. *Kol Yisrael Areyvim Zeh bazeh* – teaches that all Jews are mixed up with each other. And the two versions are not unrelated, for the more we are involved *with* each other, the more responsibility we will accept *for* each other.

It is easy, certainly easier, not to care about people we do not know. It is hard, certainly harder, to ignore the needs of those closest to us.

Indifference is in direct proportion to the distance traveled from another human heart. The more someone becomes a stranger to me, the easier and more tempting it is not to care.

I remember a few years back on a family trip to Israel, I was taking my son Ari to Mea Shearim to have his *tefillen* checked. As we walked the narrow streets of that bastion of Ultra-Orthodoxy, I casually asked him if he felt that he had more in common with these black coated, black hated, long bearded Jews, or with his non-Jewish friends back on his college campus. He gave my question some thought and then responded, “In so many ways I feel closer to my non-Jewish friends back at school, but I also know that if Hitler had his way, I would be on the same cattle car with these Jews and my non-Jewish friends would go their merry way.” *Kol Yisrael Aryvim Zeh Lazeh, Zeh Bazeh* - And we were both quiet after that, contemplating how much we were mixed up with these Jews, and troubled by how we had allowed ourselves to become distant from them and how they had allowed themselves to become distant from us.

A woman comes to the Kotel to pray with a *tallit* and to read from the torah. She is met by the angry taunts and insulting shouts of Ultra-Orthodox fellow Jews. It is my contention that this confrontation is not because they don’t agree with us, but because they don’t care enough about us.

When a young person tells me they no longer wish to be involved in things Jewish, they don’t have time for Hebrew School; or a family tells me they no longer wish to be a member of our community, I don’t believe they are making an intellectual statement about what they believe and what they think. I believe they are saying, “we have grown distant from this place, this people, this tradition. Distant enough that we no longer care to be *areyvim* – *mixed up with you, responsible for you, involved with you.*”

In 2018 it is not that Judaism has a less compelling argument to make to you

In 2018 it is that Judaism has become a less compelling presence in your lives.

It is the distance that is killing us.

Distance is killing our nation, our world, our families and our faith.

Isn't it ironic --- we speak of the world getting smaller and yet I speak of how we have become more distant from each other?

Isn't it ironic that in this connected world, where something happens half way around the globe and it is seen in our living rooms as it is happening, and yet, we have never felt so distant from one another?

2000 years ago there was a great day of misfortune – Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai had become so distant from each other that a Jew murdered another Jew because they disagreed. The shock of that moment changed the future course of Judaism. The leaders of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai found a way to bridge the gap – overcome the distance that had separated them. They found a way to marry each other and eat together – can we?

I stood in my back yard this summer and looked over at Kelly Ann's back yard – a few feet away. And I decided that had she come out, I would extend my hand, introduce myself, tell her that I was new to the neighborhood and I look forward to being her neighbor. Maybe I should send Kelly Ann a copy of my sermon and invite her for a barbeque next summer.

There was no one who disagreed more than Hillel and Shammai. But they continued to eat with each other and marry each other and they continued to disagree with each other.

Did they speak ill of each other in the quiet of their own homes? Was Shammai sometimes given to fits of rage over Hillel's liberal interpretations? Was his strict mindset unnerved by his opponent's openness? Was Hillel equally perplexed by Shammai? I imagine they did, but still, they allowed their disciples to marry and they continued to share a table.

I wish I could seek their guidance for how to maintain a sense of collegiality and friendship with those whom I vehemently disagree.

What was the question that Natan Sharansky and Gil Troy asked: Can American and Israeli Jews Stay together as One People?" We can and we must – we are family.

So, this February we will go and travel the land, we will see the sights and meet her people. And we will break bread with them and I have no doubt we will argue with them – that is what we Jews do best.

I look forward to the conversation. I look forward to having the opportunity to engage the ideas of those I love with whom I disagree. If I remain here and they remain there – all we have between us is a chasm.

But, when I go there, all we will need is a table; a table and some good food and wine. We will share some laughter and even share some tears. And then can we can begin the arguments for the sake of heaven – just like Hillel and Shammai.

On Rosh Hashanah I wanted you to be my neighbor – today I want you to be more – I want you to be my family