

SERMON BACK TO SCHOOL ROCK SHABBAT 8.9.19
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Elu v'Elu Devarim

Words matter profoundly in Judaism. In many ways, the entire Talmud is one long argument over centuries about the meaning and power of words. We are called the “People of the Book” but it would perhaps be more accurate to call us a tradition that holds words and language sacred.

In Hebrew, the word for “words” is *devarim*. This week, in our Torah reading, we start the *Book of Devarim*, also known as Deuteronomy. It is the “Book of Words”.

In it, Moses has many many words. It is really one long speech. One of the first things Moses says is: *You shall not be partial in judgment: hear out low and high alike. Fear no man, for judgment is God's.* (Deut 1:17)

Judgement is God's. But I think judgement is very human as well. In fact, we have a powerful instinct to judge, because judging others is how we reassure ourselves that we are good. We are in the ‘good camp,’ ‘the good tribe.’ This is powerful, and reinforcing our own strong beliefs is deeply gratifying, and releases lots of feel-good reward chemicals in our brains.

Today, so much of our lives online amounts to virtue-signaling – making sure others see that we are on the side of truth and justice. We live in a time where the instinct to judge one another, to get into our camps seems to be strengthened by the text-based, word-based communications of social media.

Devarim.

So as some of you are going off to college, or back to school, I want to share something I think is powerful from our tradition: Disagreement does not have to be judgement. Disagreement does not have to be judgement.

Our most famous pair of rabbis is Hillel and Shammai, who lived in the first century. They were on opposite sides of everything. Shammai was very strict, very ‘by the book,’ and did not really seem to like people very much. Hillel was more

liberal. He wanted to make sure the law made people's lives happier and brighter. He liked people.

His love of people led him to find ways of respecting those he didn't agree with. He looked for the good in their arguments.

And these two argued! About *everything*. For decades. People would go to Shammai to study for conversion, and he would say, "No" because he didn't like their reasons. Those people would go to Hillel, and he would say 'Yes,' trusting that as they studied, their reasons would change. This sounds a lot like the Jewish community today.

They argued passionately, for decade. One argument alone went on for three year with one saying, "the law is on my side," and the other saying, "the law is on my side. This went on until finally, according to the Talmud, God got fed up and a divine voice shouts out, "Both this one and that one are words of the living God, but the law is according to Hillel."

I think there is much wisdom here. Opposite opinions can both be sacred, as long as the people holding them have good motives and intentions.

Both this and that are words of the living God.

As you go back to school, and we live our lives, we should try and remember this lesson. Instead of thinking of all the reasons we are right about something, we could ask those who disagree *why* they think what they think. *What are their fears? What do they hope for? What do they love?*

Instead of talking, ask questions. Listen.

That is what our tradition urges. Things that seem simple are actually quite complex, and teasing out that complexity is sacred in Judaism. Reducing things to slogans and hashtags – not so much.

And the Talmud tells us that the reason the law went according to Hillel, was because Hillel was nice and didn't blow up. He treated the followers of Shammai with great respect. He showed respect for their ideas, even though he disagreed.

So let's try to be like Hillel. And let's try to be like God in this story: we can see that both sides come from people trying to be good just like we are, and that is sacred, but we still have to make decisions, to have our beliefs and values.

I want to end by sharing some writing on this part of the Talmud from my Talmud professor, Michael Chernick. Michael is modern orthodox, but taught at a Reform seminary, and the love of people, the openness, and the passion he brought to teaching Talmud made him one of the most loved and respected teachers.

He wrote about this Hillel and Shammai issue, where the Talmud says that both were arguing for the Sake of Heaven, meaning with good intentions. Chernick writes:

When people argue for the sake of heaven, they put aside ego and the need to win at all costs. By not descending into ad hominem insults and dismissal of the truth of the other participant in the argument, the parties to the argument bring to light different facets of ultimate truth. In this way, they arrive at as much truth as human beings are vouchsafed. This truth, which is the end product of a combination of deeply held principles tempered by a willingness to yield in the face of a point of view that resonates with the mind or the heart, endures and has a powerful impact on the lives of those who hear and accept it. –

Shabbat Shalom.