

Kol Nidre/Erev Yom Kippur
October 11, 2016 – 10 Tishre 5777

Biblical Hebrew, a very ancient language indeed, has no indigenous words for *tact, civility, diplomacy, or understatement*. As modern Hebrew developed, it has had to borrow from other languages to create these modern-day Hebrew words. You might ask why...

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, past Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain and the British Commonwealth, suggests that these words – *tact, civility, diplomacy, or understatement* – “... arise in cultures that have long held power. These concepts have developed as a way to soften conflicts as they arise... to make it possible to disagree without being disagreeable. Lacking power for the past two thousand years,” says Rabbi Sacks, “Jews did not learn the arts of conflict containment... And that, today, is dangerous.”

Let’s face it, during the past two thousand years, there have been very famous Jews who have served as diplomats in a variety of ways and places – but not necessarily effective within Israel and our own Jewish community.

The thing is, Judaism contains some of the most original thinking about relationships between self and others. Judaism is *about* relationships. The Greeks asked, “What exists?” Jews asked, “What is the *relationship* between the things that exist?” In the book of Genesis, the first thirty-four verses tell the story of the creation of the universe... The rest of the book is almost entirely about how human beings relate to each other – and to God.

Judaism is also about conversation. And conversation with God. Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Job – they all argue with God. Look for that in other sacred books; you won’t find it. And as they argue with God, they also argue with each other; the prophets argue with the people and its leaders, with their kings and with their priests.

Think about it; our key texts are anthologies of arguments!

Rabbinic literature continues the tradition. In the Mishnah, Rabbi X says one thing, and Rabbi Y says another. The Midrash is usually a series of interpretations, taking different views, on the same words. The Talmud takes the arguments to new heights as not only are the Talmudic rabbis arguing points, but then the page is surrounded with conflicting commentaries across time. And in the *Mikraot Gedolot*, classic Jewish commentaries on the books of the Bible, there too Rashi will say one thing, Ibn Ezra will take a different stand, Rashbam (Rashi's grandson) will disagree with his grandfather, and Nachmanides will explain them all and then give his own view!

We Jews know what it means to argue; but an argument is a collaborative activity, a conversation scored for many voices. It is not what people do alone.

Rabbi Sacks, in a chapter called "The Jewish Conversation" from his book *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-first Century*, points to what we all see – "... there is too much anger and vituperation in the Jewish world today, too much speaking, and too little listening, too much condemnation and too little understanding, too much self-righteousness and too little humility, too much seeking respect and too little paying respect, too much preoccupation with our fears and pains and too little attention paid to others' fears and pains."

These are moral failures... and ultimately, they are spiritual failures. They are failures that occur when we only think of ourselves, when we can only see ourselves... when we dwell alone.

Rabbi Sacks invites us to think about a *theology of conversation*. A way of thinking about conversation taking into account that how we relate to other people shapes, and is shaped by, how we relate to God. Fail there, and we fail elsewhere.

And note that he uses the word conversation, not dialogue. Nowadays, dialogues seem to come pre-scripted – dialogues between faiths, between religion and science, between cultures... Dialogues are rarely genuine encounters. Conversations are not pre-scripted; you don't know how they will end – and you might not even know how they will begin. But what you do know is that conversations can change you because you are opening yourself up to another mind, to an alternate perspective.

To guide us in this encounter, Rabbi Sacks gives us some principles to keep in mind.

The first principle is: God lives in language.

The only ultimate connection between an infinite God and finite human beings is language. Many see the words of Torah as God speaking to us... and see our words of prayer as our speaking to God. Rabbi Sacks writes that: "...Language is the narrow bridge across the abyss between soul and soul, whether the relationship is between two people, or between one's self and the Self of the Universe." Language can help us not dwell alone.

Rabbi Sacks' second principle with regard to conversation is: When words end, violence begins.

If we turn to the story of Cain and Abel and look closely at the text, we find what is called: fractured syntax. In Genesis 4:8 we read, "And Cain said to Abel... And it came to pass when they were in the field that Cain rose up against Abel and killed him." It says, "And Cain said to Abel..." but it does not say *what* Cain said. Style mirrors substance. The fractured syntax represents the fractured relationship between the two brothers. Their conversation broke down. "And Cain said..." but his speech went no further, and there was nothing but tension and silence. When words fail, violence begins. That is the point of the verse. Rabbi Sacks teaches us that "... speech can heal hate; silence incubates it."

And Rabbi Sacks third principle is: To hear, you have to listen.

Conversation is more than just the act of speaking. It involves an act of listening. In English, almost all our words for understanding are governed by the metaphor of sight. We speak of insight, hindsight, foresight... people being perceptive... making an observation. By contrast, in the Babylonian Talmud we find the metaphor of hearing. When a proof is about to be brought, it says '*Ta sh'ma* – come and hear.' When it speaks of inference, it says '*Shema mina* – hear from this.' When someone disagrees with a proposition, it says '*Lo shemai'ah leih* – He could not hear it.' And so on. In Western culture, understanding is a form of seeing. In Judaism, understanding is a form of listening... and listening well.

This is brought out in the famous story of Elijah from the First book of Kings. Elijah is zealous for God, and confronts the prophets of Baal before the people of Israel during the reign of King Ahab and his Queen Jezebel. After a successful showdown, and newfound religious fervor for God among the people, Elijah is now unpopular with the king and queen and a warrant is out for his life. He runs into the wilderness and finds himself at Mount Horeb (another name for Sinai) and there he finds God. Suddenly there is a great and powerful wind that tears the mountain apart and shatters rocks, but God is not in the wind. Then there is an earthquake. But God is not in the earthquake. Then there is fire. But God is not in the fire. Then comes a *kol demama dakah* – a still small voice. God is in the voice.

The *kol demama dakah* – that still small voice – is a sound you can only hear if you are listening. God exists in the silence of the soul when we make space for God's voice. This requires active listening... present in the religious encounter and... present in a true human encounter.

Time and again today, as Jewish communities – and within Jewish communities, we find ourselves unable to speak with a single voice. Rabbi Sacks is greatly concerned that this can lead us, as it has historically led us, to becoming our own worst enemies.

I would suggest that perhaps we do not need to speak with a *single* voice, but we do need to be able to speak with each other and to listen to each other and to be able to resolve our conflicts. The religious, cultural, ethnic, and political fragmentation of Israeli society and the religious and political divisions of the Diaspora are cause enough for us to seek common ground. We have our tradition to support us in this endeavor. If the many voices of our tradition can fit on a page of Talmud or Torah commentary, there should be room for the many voices of our present to fit around the table, to engage in conversation, and hold the variety of views in constructive ways.

This endeavor can also begin with each of us in our own lives, as we keep in mind that:

Language is holy.

As we keep in mind that: words are how we connect with God – and with each other.

As we strive to seek resolution through conversation; knowing that when words end, tension and conflict grow.

As we begin Yom Kippur together, let us quiet ourselves to be able to hear the voice of each other and that which is holy in our lives.