

ROSH HASHANAH MORNING 30 SEPT

If there is one thing the Jews have to teach the world, perhaps more than anything else, it is how to disagree. Two Jews, three opinions. The man surviving alone on a desert island who, when rescued, reveals two synagogues – the one I go to, and the one I don't go to. Even the Yiddish word, broigus, unique to us, which means a disagreement among family – you may think your brother's an idiot, but he's still your brother.

The root of this Jewish ability to argue without destroying your opponent, lies about 2,000 years ago with the great Rabbis Hillel and Shammai. They were always arguing and usually Rabbi Hillel, the more lenient and gentle of the two, won out. In fact there's no evidence of animosity between the two – but their students, the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai were always tearing strips off each other. How do we know? Because it's recorded in the Talmud, a 60-volume commentary on Jewish law, edited 1500 years ago, which is one long running argument spanning several centuries – and the minority opinion is always recorded. Why bother recording the views of the School of Shammai? Why record the minority view, when the law is going the other way?

Because the Rabbis understood that there was an inherent value to respectful discussion and the exchange of ideas. That often the nature of the debate is as important as the conclusion. Of course

sometimes you have to draw the line and make a rule that everyone sticks to – but the more disagreement there is about something, the harder it is to enforce.

We need some of the wisdom of Hillel and Shammai today. It feels like our country has never been so polarised. We are still divided over Brexit. Both our main political parties are bitterly divided. We have seen a rise in nationalism over the past few years, with an increasing number of hate crimes – and of particular concern to us, a blurring of anti-zionism and anti-semitism on the Left that has left many of us feeling insecure, vulnerable and politically homeless. We are I think uniquely divided too, across the generations, with a technological divide between those broadly under the age of 40, who are digital natives, having grown up with the internet and mobile phones, and those of us who did not.

We all have multiple identities. We are Jews, Reform Jews, but we are also British, with our own separate political allegiances, family loyalties, interests and intellectual pursuits. We don't necessarily agree with each other about anything. So when we find our society divided we need to re-discover the ability to disagree without splitting apart. In Jewish tradition both sides of any disagreement are often right in their own way. Both of them have a point of view.

The Schools of Hillel and Shammai argued for three years. And eventually a Divine Voice emerged and said Both these and these are

the voice of the Living God - “eilu v’eilu divrei Elochim Chaim” - but the law goes with the School of Hillel. In other words, the law has to go one way, but both sides were respected, both heard and both sides had something of God in them.

The Talmud goes on to ask – so if they were both so great, why did the law go with Hillel? The answer is that the students of Hillel were agreeable and patient, showing restraint when they were offended, and when they taught the law, they would teach their version and the perspectives of the opposing School of Shammai. They had to argue the other side, to put themselves in the other’s shoes.

Imagine how different the political discourse might be if the Government had to explain why 48% of the country voted Remain before they presented their policy. And in indeed the reverse.

What we can offer the world is the idea and the importance of conversation. People across the country are feeling disconnected, not listened to. Divided. Angry. We need to listen to each other, to acknowledge that both sides may be right in different ways.

And perhaps we have something else to offer the current national debate too. Many communities voted Leave because they felt forgotten, because in the great globalised future that the EU represented, their local communities were changing and not for the better. Jewish tradition emphasises importance of memory. For us

memory is alive in the present. We are universalist, yes, Jews live everywhere and we try to repair the whole world. But we are also particularist. We understand the importance of attachment to a particular place, a particular community. The divisions over Brexit show how important it is to be remembered – the Leave campaign named an anger that was real. And we all know that behind anger there is often grief and loss. People voted Leave or Remain for many complicated reasons but many communities articulated a feeling of loss of local identity and sense of belonging. Belonging to community matters.

The issue for us, I think, is not really whether we leave Europe or not, with a deal or not. It is how to frame a vision in which we live with differences. We need to have roots. We need to limit social inequality so that we do not feel we are living in different universes. We need to hear each other – but we also need a strong moral narrative which the market cannot provide.

We need a narrative that allows us to engage with history, suffering, sacrifice, love, sorrow. We need to engage with society and social change and we need to do it with all our hearts.

Every culture needs its great myths from which we learn who we are. Today on the first day of the Jewish New Year, as we imagine we are standing in judgement, or perhaps we look at our own lives and judge ourselves, we read about our first great moral hero –

Abraham. In Rabbinic tradition God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son is the last of ten tests, the Jewish answer to the trials of Hercules, which begin with the call to leave his home and family and follow God to an unknown place. Jewish archetypes are complicated, flawed, challenging. This is the end of his journey in many ways. The three-day walk as Abraham and Isaac walk to the mountain to what Abraham believe is going to be a place of death, is the longest walk of his life. It is up to us to decide whether God's test was Abraham's willingness to obey God, or Abraham's refusal to sacrifice the life of another. At the end of the day, he does not kill his son. Success is not always about doing exactly what you intended to do at the beginning of your journey. Sometimes the journey, whether it is individual, or national, changes you and the outcome ends up to be something different from what you had intended. And sometimes the most important thing is that we heal our many divisions, and like Abraham and Isaac, like Hillel and Shammai, we walk on together, in mutual respect, to a place of healing and hope. May we repair the fractures in our society, may we find a way to speak to each other across the political divide, may we always know in our humanity that what we have in common is greater than what divides us, and may we deepen our connection with each other, across the world and across our community. Ken Yehi Ratzon.