

## **RABBI'S MESSAGE**

### **America and Judaism: Worlds of Disagreement and Reconciliation**

In 2005, the Supreme Court of the United States of America, in a 5-4 decision, ruled that the display of the Ten Commandments on government property in Kentucky was unconstitutional, violating the First Amendment's provision against the government establishing a religion.

Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jews do not eat rice on Passover, and usually name their children after relatives who have passed away. Sephardic (Middle Eastern) Jews eat rice on Passover and often name their children after living relatives.

The principles of the United States and the principles of Judaism have a lot in common. They're both based on laws, but the practice is developed by the interpretation of those laws. And that's where disagreements come in. Tevya, the famous character in *Fiddler on the Roof* (originated by Sholom Aleichem's short stories) listened to one argument and say "you're right." When he heard the second argument, he said, "You're also right." The rabbi's son asked him, "How can they both be right?" and Tevya said, "You know, you're also right!"

I find it interesting that America is so often referred to as a "Christian nation" when it seems to behave so Jewishly!

In fact, honest, respectful disagreement is very much a part of how to be an American and how to observe Judaism. Jewish people will differ in their concepts of dietary laws, Shabbat observance, tzedakah priorities and righteous living. Sometimes, there are many right answers and one custom "wins." Rabbi Shammai suggested eight Hanukkah candles be lit the first night with one fewer candle lit each night. Rabbi Hillel suggested we begin with one candle the first night and increase to eight by the final night. Shammai argued that in the story about the oil lasting eight days, there was less oil each night; Hillel countered that our joy increases throughout the holiday. Hillel's opinion became the practice, but like Supreme Court decisions, Shammai's minority opinion is still remembered. We hang our mezuzah at an angle in our doorways. Why? Rashi said that the mezuzah should be hung vertically, presumably to point toward heaven. His grandson said it should hang horizontally, perhaps to point inside the home. So, we compromise, and tilt the mezuzah.

When Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, Orthodox and Conservative synagogues do not blow the shofar. Many Reform congregations do, including Temple Beth Torah. Talmudic rabbis have offered both opinions. One says that because the shofar was blown on Shabbat/Rosh Hashanah in the days of the Holy Temple, we should continue the practice to remind us of our goal to have the Temple rebuilt; another says that because the shofar was blown on Shabbat/Rosh Hashanah, we should not blow the shofar on these days until the Temple is rebuilt. Both have valid points. Some Jews follow one way, some the other.

The Talmud, the oral tradition that dictates most of Jewish practice, includes all the arguments, giving us the opportunity to study and explore those ideas that did not make it into modern practice. Like Supreme Court decisions, majority and minority opinions are published. And many times, the arguments continue.

I recently heard a lecture by Dr. David Dow, a constitutional law professor from the University of Houston. He commented that the Constitution was formed to make enforcement of law obvious, and offered the question, "So why do we have so many cases? Shouldn't most of these decisions be obvious?" When he teaches in law school, he said that there are some laws that don't totally make sense; you just need to know which is which. He compared it to Jews knowing the difference between which blessings to recite. When do we say hamotzi, the prayer for bread, and when does the cake, or pizza, or cookies not "count" as bread and require a different blessing? Do we say the prayer for bread or grains over cornbread? Do we say the prayer for fruit from trees over banana bread?

While Jewish people employ a variety of practices, we honor the concept of k'lal Yisrael – the whole community of Israel. We do our best to determine which practices make sense for us while respecting that another's opinion could be just as valid. It doesn't keep us from having disagreements and sometimes heated arguments. But hopefully, at the end of the day, we maintain respect for our differences as we share a people-hood.

Americans are about to choose a new president. There are passionate supporters and detractors of both candidates and political parties. Whoever becomes President must understand the concept of K'lal America, and serve the whole community. Disagreements and discussions will continue, and hopefully, like Tevya, we'll be able to listen to the variances and see the valid points of each.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Tarfon was asked by students, "Which is more important, study or practice?" He answered, "Practice is more important." Rabbi Akiva said, "Study is more important." The students were faced with two great teachers who said the opposite. So, they concluded, "Study is more important when it leads to practice."

And the mezuzah remains tilted.

Let's keep our minds and hearts open to being part of two whole communities, as we recognize there's room for all of us in Judaism and in America.

L'shalom,  
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