

Listening for Truth

A Talmudic midrash teaches that when G-d was creating the world and announced to the angels plans to “create humans in our image,” angels took up sides. Some angels were in favor of the creation and others were not. It is written, “Love and Truth fought together; righteousness and peace combatted each other” (Psalms 85:11).

Love said, “Let him be created, as he will perform acts of love.” Truth said, “No, he will be filled with falsehood.” Righteousness said, “Yes, he will do righteous deeds,” but Peace said, “No, he will perform acts of war.”

The angels fought with each other and “Truth was thrust to the ground” (Daniel 8:11). The Holy One said, “Let Truth spring up from the earth” (Psalms 85:12) and, as the angels were distracted by their own arguments, G-d created Adam.

It's interesting to note why the individual angels opposed each other. Their differences have to do with whether or not they can be corrected once disturbed. Righteousness and peace were adversaries, because acts of justice can correct wrongs, but when peace exists, a single act of war can completely ruin it.

If a truthful person tells a lie, it makes everything they've said before suspicious. But acts of love can make difference. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Love is the one thing that can turn an enemy into a friend.”

Arguments are not surprising. The midrash suggests that even before the beginning of time, before humans entered the world, conflict already existed. The Talmud is full of disagreements and, G-d knows, human beings are bound to have different opinions.

The angels in this story demonstrate a horrible example. When the disagreements became passionate, they also became violent. Passionate disagreements can turn dangerous when there is a lack of respect for opposing viewpoints.

Today, opposing viewpoints are magnified by misinformation, partial information, exaggerations and misunderstandings. Some become willing to accept that one view is 100% right and another is 100% wrong, based on sources they trust and sources they mistrust.

The nuances of complicated issues get lost in the overwhelming onslaught of attacks. Just as bad, friendships and other relationships are jeopardized by a zeal that assumes a totalitarian opinion and an unwillingness to consider alternative ideas.

Torah's most sacred statement – Shema Yisrael – begins with the word for “listen” and ends with the word “ONE” (Echad). The word Shema, itself, starts with the letter shin, the

“shhhh” of sheket (quiet) and shalom (peace). We must find the peaceful quiet so we can hear our neighbor.

As Jews, we are bound to disagree about important issues. Yet we remain ONE people. We may disagree, we may argue, and we may feel very strongly about our own views. But it is important to listen closely with open hearts, so we can remain unified in our efforts to uphold our most important values, like “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). When we respect ourselves, we can extend that to respecting others, and we truly be, as Isaiah prophesized, “A Light unto the Nations.”

It begins with listening.

Shana Tova.

Rabbi Dan Gordon
Temple Beth Torah