

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Listening, Hearing and Moving Forward

Shammai said: Make a fixed time for learning your Torah.

Say little and do much and receive everyone with a cheerful face. Pirke Avot 1:15

Embracing the beginning of a new year and a new decade gives us the opportunity to examine those areas in which we, as individuals and as a community, can improve. It's no secret that wide gaps in opinions have led to uncomfortable divisiveness. When people or groups become so focused on their personal viewpoint, they can come to believe that their own perception is the absolute truth and anyone who disagrees is either foolish or lying. A popular story from the Talmud illustrates how passionately opinionated disagreements can create unfortunately deep chasms.

A group of rabbis were discussing whether a certain clay pot was kosher. The recognized expert in this matter was Rabbi Eliezer, who offered his ruling. Rabbi Joshua, however, disagreed, and three fellow rabbis sided with Rabbi Joshua. Rabbi Eliezer sought to prove his point by making magical predictions that came true, including causing a tree to uproot on its own and a stream to change directions. Each time, Rabbi Joshua refused to accept these tricks as proving the truth, until a voice from Heaven intervened to endorse Rabbi Eliezer's expertise. Rabbi Joshua did not even accept the Heavenly voice, but justified his viewpoint by quoting from Torah: "...*This instruction is not beyond your reach...It is **not** in the heavens...but close to you, in your mouth and in your heart...*" (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

By the time they were finished, the clay pot had been forgotten. Truth was no longer an issue, only who could win the argument and which techniques were most effective. Eliezer used irrelevant magic tricks to demonstrate his power. Joshua quoted Torah out of context and used his "gang" of other rabbis to suggest that a majority opinion can establish and even overrule the truth. By ignoring the real issue, these rabbis revealed that even respected leaders, when they let their egos take over, can childishly make a mess of things. The result of this disagreement? Hurt feelings, humiliation, loss of respect and the end of civil discourse among these rabbis.

Hundreds of years later, we can make the same mistakes. We can put ourselves and others into labeled categories, cheering everything on one side of the coin and vilifying everything on the other side. Or we can listen to each other. We can disagree respectfully without interrupting and interjecting our views before someone else is finished speaking. We can look at people as complete, thinking individuals whose thoughts are not defined by a label. We can humbly acknowledge to ourselves that we don't know everything about everything. As Shammai suggested, we can learn regularly, saying little, doing much, and just as importantly, receive *all* others with a smile.

Our most sacred teaching: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*. Listen, Israel. The Eternal is our God; the Eternal is One. It begins with "listen." It ends with "one." Our unity as a people *requires* listening with an open mind and an open heart. Let's give it a try this year. Our future is at stake. Happy New Year, and let's enjoy the 2020's together...as one!

L'shalom,

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Rabbi Dan Gordon