

I can still feel the visceral discomfort as I sat across from Rabbi Poller, Partnered with him as we participated in a Sound Shore Clergy program on Conflict Management & Reconciliation.

As a 28-year-old first year Assistant, the last thing I wanted to do was engage in conflict with anyone, let alone my Senior Rabbi...

By the program's end, promising strategies for dealing with disagreement, The facilitator provided each clergyperson's inter-personal life approach, based on our responses...Rabbi Poller was ranked as an "active-aggressor." I, on the other hand, was a "passive-fleeer"

If I sensed an argument in the air, I did all I could to defuse it...Humor, distraction...cartoons. OR, if things really started to heat up, I'd just run the other way. Which, of course, was no way to address issues or move the group process forward. Often, the argument is essential.

Thus, much as we, spiritual leader types, may try to "make-nice" so that everyone feels good about their connection and involvement, that is actually not the ultimate aim.

Because sooner than later, as part of a faith-community, or any community for that matter, even a country, aspiring to live out our highest-held shared ideals...

what I soon came to realize as a younger rabbi, and what I'm convinced beyond question today, in responding to the intensity and insensitivity of our world, is that, above all, you have to learn **How to Fight!**

What is at the core of our culture of nastiness;

The prevailing incivility of our country's public discourse?...

The same attitude of disrespecting and demeaning the other that often spills over to our disagreements among our people Israel, and seems to overshadow any conversation on the current political scene.

Don't ask the founding fathers of our Union.

By the time he was 16, George Washington had transcribed the code of the French Jesuits ^[1569] into *110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior*. Explicating the nuances of common human courtesies, that is, behavior "appropriate to a court," Washington, as he grew to lead this fledgling Union, Applied the code to an entire nation.

In so doing, the very first President put decency first,
Shifting people's focus from narrow self-interest to the respect
which every person must be afforded if a democracy is to stand.
From the most mundane daily behaviors
To the expectation that we live with humility of heart,
The very last entry in Washington's Civility Code is key:
*"Labor to keep alive in your breast
that little spark of celestial fire called conscience."*

How quickly that spark is darkened
When our common core of human decency is diminished.
The divisiveness which frames almost every issue is,
unfortunately, nothing new. What is new, however,
is the depth to which our public discourse has sunken;
the behavior of an unprecedented President who,
at every opportunity, adds insult to injury,
exacerbating the divide with a rhetoric of condemnation
that leads to extremism and threatens the ideals upon which we rest.

For the constitutionally-sanctioned-institution of the Free Press
to be branded "The Enemy of the People," just those media-outlets, mind you,
whose reporting runs counter to the policies of the Oval Office;
this is beyond unacceptable—it is highly dangerous. For such toxicity is contagious.
...The tragedy of five-murdered reporters at the Capitol Gazette in Annapolis.
[And,] Just a few weeks ago, a 68-year-old Los Angeles man arrested for repeated
threatening calls to journalists at the Boston Globe,
promising to "shoot them in the head" for recent editorials
dismissing the President's attacks against the press,

The caller addressing the Globe reporters as " *Enemy of the People.*"

How easy today for public accusations and Twitter tirades to ramp up
to demonization; for the person or the party with whom we disagree
to become the Devil incarnate.

With verbal assault our go-to default,
we have forgotten how to agreeably disagree,
so much so that civility, by some, is even seen as a weakness.

And while we're on the slippery slope...

Beware, lest you fall prey to the polarization play;
presuming whatever tactics you employ are ok because
the view you espouse is "truly right."

Ejecting the Press Secretary from Dinner because you diametrically oppose the political positions she defends...[Really!?] Or, pursuing members of the "opposition party" if you see them in public, as one congress-woman suggested, "at a gas-station, or in a department store, making a scene by telling them: "You are not welcome here anymore."

...Is not simply unhelpful but unhealthy,
for such an approach produces a poisonous social climate.
There is no conversation, only confrontation.

As Scott Jennings recently wrote:

"Our nation isn't designed for one group to speak and others to be silenced. Our system demands that we speak to one another, to push and pull each other, to balance one another. The American experiment requires civil discourse as the fuel for its democratic engine." [Courier Journal, 4.10.18]

So where should we, those connected to this Covenant community, turn for this essential life-skill? For whether we are attempting to navigate the great debates of Jewish peoplehood, or play our civil part in a society that often seems anything but, more than ever, we need to learn **"How to Fight."**

Turns out that Rabbinic Tradition not alone modeled the art
Starting a couple thousand years ago, they literally 'wrote the book!'

The Talmud, which most of us have never seen let alone read, the central source of Jewish Law, is actually much more. For as the collected conversations of the rabbis in the primary academies of study in Babylonia & Ancient Israel from around 200 -500 C.E., What it actually amounts to: all 63 tractates, over 6,600 pages, are the teachings, opinions, philosophy, life-musings and, most important for us, disagreements & debates providing the ultimate Jewish template on **"How to Fight."**

And, ironically, on this sacred day when our highest hope is to be at peace with ourselves and our world, in order to maintain that peace tomorrow, and make it real through the lives we live, we need a life-approach that not upholds the argument as sacred dialogue.

What is the Talmud, after all, if not one very long extended-argument; conducted in the most rabbinic way.

- If you make a comment, chiming in on the dialogue, you are duly-noted; Every voice is affirmed and heard. Indeed, all minority opinions in any discussion are preserved.
- Even more, rarely are debates formally closed...Sometimes, the last word spoken constitutes what is considered The Law, but just as often, the student is left with multiple possibilities, sent scrambling to determine how the disagreement is resolved....
- Which means, the Rabbis' rules of disputation make us all part of the argument.

Passionate disagreement, a diversity of approach which challenges operative assumptions is, in Talmudic terms, the only path to truth.

THUS, the Talmud's template for learning **How to Fight...**

Of course, not "fight" in the physical sense.

In Hebrew, it's all about the "*Machloket*—the argument/dispute" from the root "*CHaLaK*—to divide or differentiate."

Yet, depending on how the dispute happens, the *Machloket*, that is,

The "fight" can be the vehicle that unites. As the Talmud teaches:

Kol Machloket she-hi l'Shem Shamayim...[P.Avot, 5:21]

"Every argument that's for the sake of Heaven is destined to endure.

But if its not for heaven's sake, it will not endure.

What is an argument that was for the sake of Heaven?

The argument of Hillel and Shammai...

And what was an argument not for Heaven's sake? The argument of Korach."

What was the crux of Korach's argument?

Jealousy among the nation's leadership that led to Korach's deceptive manipulations of the system, false accusations, a public showdown and, with judgement from on High—death.

How is it that Hillel & Shammai were arguing for Heaven's sake?

As over 300 *Machlokets*—generations of heated argument attest:

- Despite sharp disagreements, the Houses of H & S dined at each other's tables And even married each others' families... *They chose people over power.*
- Engaging in critical exchanges, hoping their position would prevail, It was not, ultimately, about winning, but rather seeking the best solution. *They embraced purpose beyond personal glory.*
- Listening with care to the other side so as to counter thoughtfully, They were ready to admit they might be wrong. *They knew theirs was not the only way.*

And so, for our world today—what applied in Talmudic times extends every bit to us as well. For in the most critical way, How you Fight determines who you are.

...It may be no coincidence, then, that our bimah resembles a wrestling ring, For the teachings that echo must equip us to struggle to make them real in our world every day by fighting for Heaven's sake.

...To that end, I thought I'd invite a few specialists in civility into the ring; "Fighters" whose unique technique in the arena of the interpersonal, each affirming Talmudic truths through their lives/legacies, Might help us restore a degree of the respect and human dignity our democracy, our people, our world cannot live without.

Fighter for Sacred Civility—Round 1...

Vietnam war-hero; POW who spent over five years tortured, beaten in a Vietnamese prison, rejecting early release that his Navy Admiral father could have procured, But refusing to abandon his men...what made Senator John McCain a sacred civil fighter was not his suffering, but his response to it...

"He'd been to Hell and back, but never lost his zest for life."

Blunt, outspoken, political conservative leaving little question as to where he stood, McCain was fierce in devotion to what he believed in.

But even more, putting principle above party,

No matter if you disagreed with his position, his fight stood for "right."

In his 2008 run, before the ill-fated Palin ask, McCain wanted dear friend, Democrat turned Independent, Senator Joe Lieberman as his running mate.

Despite the fact that it would have turned the Republican Nat'l Convention upside down, he knew in his heart, it was the best choice.

Opting for the alternative, he reflected in his last memoir,

"My gut told me to ignore the advice, and I wish I had."

John McCain was a fighter of Talmudic proportions, not because of his politics, Not because he was a maverick—willing to buck the trend, But because he was a *mensch*.

When, during a 2008 Town Hall meeting, a questioner began to suggest a false, racist narrative about his opponent, McCain grabbed the mike, gently but firmly explaining: "No Mam, he is a decent American citizen, a good family man, with whose policies I disagree."

What kind of a person requests to be eulogized by two men who prevented him from achieving one of his greatest life ambitions?

At the funeral, Mr. Obama mused: "What better way to get a last laugh than to make George and I say nice things about him?"

But when you spend a lifetime arguing for Heaven's sake, you understand, The disagreement itself links you in common cause **and** in mutual care.

As the secret President Obama revealed so attests:

"Every so often John would come over to the White House, the Oval Office, and we'd just sit and talk...About policy...about family, and we'd talk about the state of our politics....Our disagreements didn't go away during these private conversations. They were very real, and very deep. But we still learned from each other. We never doubted the other man's sincerity, or patriotism, or that when all was said and done, we were on the same team."

Having befriended a former anti-war activist who became an AIPAC lawyer, Senator McCain spoke at David Ifshin's funeral back in 1996. "What David taught me, what he taught a great many people, was how narrow are the differences that separate us in a society united in its regard for justice; a country in love with liberty." [Jewish Week, 8.31.18]

With the pettiness, the smallness of our public discourse, As Obama put it: "John McCain called on us to be better than that, to be bigger than that."

Thus, the Senator's legacy affirms the Talmud's Truth:

"For three years the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai disagreed.

Hillel claimed: The Law is in accord with us.

And Shammai countered: The Law is in accord with us.

Then, after three years, a Heavenly Voice went forth, declaring:

"These & those are words of the living God."

No party, no platform, no president owns the truth.

It is only open-minded, honest dialogue that enables us to discover it.

HOW we fight determines WHO we are....

Fighter for Sacred Civility—Round 2...

When white supremacists and Neo-Nazi's marched on Charlottesville on a sunny Saturday morning a year ago August, purportedly in opposition to a plan to remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee from a city park,

There was nothing civil about it....

The night before, as the tiki torch bearing soldiers of hate terrorized the UVA campus, amassing around the statue of Thomas Jefferson,

they were met by a large group of counter-protestors—university students, community members, who stood their ground, in effect,

defending the Jefferson statue; a debate in/of itself...

Just last month, the new UVA President James E. Ryan
[appointed last year 2 weeks after the March]
commemorating the year-anniversary, used the Jefferson statue
to teach a foundational truth on the nature of our nation's civil discourse.
"I'm certain, defending the Jefferson statue, the students were fully aware of his
complicated legacy—author of the Declaration of Independence which proclaimed the
equality of all, he was also a slaveowner."

[*"The Imperfect Pursuit of Higher Ideals," James E. Ryan, President, UVA Address, 8.11.18*]

And so, the ongoing struggle, Ryan asserts,
"to come to grips with the gaps between our aspirations and our everyday realities
is indeed what being an American is all about."

Or a Jew, for that matter. We live in the struggle; it is literally our name...
But how we engage with the "other side" in that struggle means everything.
Thus, Ryan's ultimate message: "We must recognize that those who share our
aspirations are like family. Now, just like family...we are going to get annoyed,
exasperated, and even disappointed with each other. We will certainly argue about
the best way to live our values...Functional families argue...but they give each other
the benefit of the doubt, knowing that they are—and always will be—in this together."

With nastiness the norm, it's easy to forget that we are family;
our communities meant to be cooperatives.

But the life-questions are so polarizing we misguidedly believe
That it's the people we are fighting rather than the issues.

And in the struggle to win, we forget the foundations upon which we stand/rest.

Prof. Alan Reiner teaches a seminar at Towson University called:

"Mister Rogers 101: Why Community & Civility Still Matter."

Reiner attributes our societal decline in civility to what renowned Sociologist of
Religion, Robert Putnam called "Bowling Alone."

Younger generations, in particular, live in relative isolation;
they don't know their neighbors; they don't serve their communities...

They are not joiners or belongers, and so, have little life-experience working through
real life conflicts. Reiner explains: [NY Times, Teddy Wayne, 2.19.17]

"People think, 'If I disagree with you, then I must dislike you...'

*Civility is the idea that you're not always going to agree, but you still have to find a
way to make it work...for, in this world, we're all ultimately pulling for the same thing."*

Difference far too often divides us; we dare not let it define us.

When the struggle become a brawl; when words become weapons,

We forget, not alone what we're fighting for, we forget who we are...

Thus the Talmud's truth:

WHY was Adam created singular in the world? To prevent inter-family fighting, so that one should not say to the other, 'My father was greater than yours.' [Sanhedrin, 88b]

Our Source is the same; every one of us, God's creation.

If we could only see beneath the surface to the Image we all share inside.

Fighter for Sacred Civility—Round 3...

Sitting around the Paul Family table as a 17-year-old kid,

I had no idea what I was in for.

I had never witnessed Jewish family table/after-dinner discussion as a contact sport.

Certainly not in my family where eating was the primary activity.

But sitting at the dinner table with my girlfriend Susan's family,

Susan one of 7 siblings, so usually 11 or 12 of us gathered,

Was a lesson in the importance of arguing

And how, even when its heated, it can be for Heaven's sake...

...Sometimes we were still at dinner; often it was watching TV in the Den...

[Why the family squeezed into the smallest room in their expansive house to watch TV I'll never know...Or maybe I do!]

For it almost never failed. An opinion on a given subject would be shared,

Only to be countered by an alternate understanding, usually not softly.

Then an impassioned argument would ensue, not a free-for-all,

but pretty much no holds barred.

At times, it could even escalate to "in your face" aggression...

I recall after one such heated exchange,

the disputants Susan and her sister Ellen...[2 years younger.]

I have no clue what the "argument" was about.

What was most shocking to me was that half an hour or so later,

We were all headed to Dairy Queen in the same car, along with Tevey,

the Paul family dog...[a Boxer]

Later that night when it was just the 2 of us I gently questioned:

"You're not still angry?"

To which Susan explained: "I was never angry.

If I can't argue with my sister and say what I really think,

who can I argue with?...My sister knows I love her."

We were all packed in the smallest room in the house every evening,

Because the Paul family wanted more than anything to be close,

And they truly were/are—so close
that they sometimes treaded on each other's territory...
And so, dialogue turned to debate and even into disagreement.
Yet no one walked away angry, at least not usually for very long...
And I [who never once opened my mouth] learned an invaluable life-lesson:
As important as that ice cream run together was,
The ability to argue was even more sweet...

The Talmud tells the story of one of the great rabbinic study-partnerships,
Rabbi Yochanan & Reish Lakish,
who may have started out as a Roman gladiator, or a gangster.
and became, thanks to Rabbi Yochanan, a sharp as a whip Torah scholar.
On every dispute both offered differing opinions, and so their learning thrived.
Until, one day, while they studied, an argument on ritual impurity
led R' Yochanan to respond not with a counter-argument, but with an insult,
alluding to Reish Lakish's shady past...Then, on his high horse,
R' Yochanan said, in effect, "I made you what you are today."
Both men walked away angry. THEN, the real tragedy of the tale...
Reish Lakish falls ill. Yochanan's sister comes to beg him to make peace,
But he refuses, and Reish Lakish dies.
R' Yochanan falls into a deep state of grief, and so the Rabbis ask:
Who shall we send to ease his pain? [and to be his new study-partner.]
They send R' Elazar ben Pedat...He goes to Rabbi Yochanan and sits before him,
And on every teaching they studied, whatever R' Yochanan stated,
R' Elazar would reply: "There is a [Baraita] citation which supports you..."
After a while, R' Yochanan screamed:
"You are no Lakish! When I stated a Law, Lakish used to raise 24 objections,
To which I'd come up with 24 answers to counter, which led us to a true
understanding...But all you can say is: "There is a citation to support you."
Don't I know my teachings are true? I don't need you to tell me!"
Thus R' Yochanan tore his garments crying aloud:
"Where is Lakish, O son of Lakish..." Crying and crying,
Until, bereft of his partner, his mind was turned...and he too died. [Baba Metzia 84a]

The argument is essential to our very survival,
For without our ability to challenge, to question,
without the dissenting voice of disagreement,

All we will hear is our very own voice—an echo chamber.

And then, believing the only truth is our own,
we cease to acknowledge any other perspective...

And then, psycho-spiritually, we die...

The Talmud's teaching doesn't mince words:

O Chevrutah O Mitutah—Either Dialogue—or Death.

Searching at Anderson's Book Shop through the new releases one Shabbat Summer
July afternoon, the titles a virtual battle in partisan political warfare,

I discovered the book that sparked this sermon,

A little, pithy, illustrated life-meditation authored by my favorite

Zen-master, mindfulness-maven, Thich Nhat Hanh, entitled **HOW TO FIGHT...**

Just hearing some of the headings of his *"Notes on Fighting"*:

Opening the Door—Listening to Others—Listening to Ourselves

Killing Anger—Right Thinking—Loving Speech—The Power of Gentleness, I

understood, Hahn wrote a treatise on reconciliation, acknowledging the task we share:

"We are all connected...As nations and individuals, we have so many wrong perceptions about ourselves and each other, and these are the foundation of our hatred, fear, and distrust. Each one of us needs to practice looking and listening deeply so we can understand ourselves and others...This work cannot be achieved by our elected officials. The situation of our country and our world is too important to be entrusted to politicians alone. We need to practice compassionate listening and loving speech with ourselves, our loved ones, our community, with strangers...The real enemy is not the other; it is our ignorance...But with the practice of compassionate dialogue, we can transform anger into understanding, [even] hatred into love..." [How to Fight, pgs 73,83]

So, this New Year,

whether arguing on the couch or in this congregation or in the halls of Congress,

Disagreeing in a dialogue that helps every voice be heard,

Understanding that civility upholds the sanctity of an Image we all share,

Perceiving our argument as a path to resolution that preserves the dignity of all,

Let us learn to Fight for Heaven's sake...

The ONE-ness of our world may depend on it.

AMEN