

Sermon for Yom Kippur
September 15, 2021 – 10 Tishri, 5782
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
Rabbi Daniel Levin

For as long as he can remember, Majdi Wadi's mother was obsessed with the American Dream. Born and raised as a Palestinian refugee in Kuwait, America offered the Wadi family something they could find nowhere else on earth – “a land of opportunity and a place to call home... a place to achieve their dreams.”¹

Finally, in 1992 Majdi joined his brother in Minneapolis where the two launched their dream to share their culture with the larger community. And how would they do it? Hummus.

From one small grocery, “Holyland” grew and grew –supermarkets, a bakery, restaurants, a catering operation, and a hummus factory. Their hummus could be found in stores across the country. With nearly 200 employees, Majdi said his business was like “the United Nations – we have Hispanic, we have African American, we have African Immigrants, we have European, ... name it. And this also reflected the people that we served.”

In the summer of 2020 – in the aftermath of the explosion of racial tension in Minneapolis, Majdi's daughter Lianne decided to go out and join the protest movements. The family hung Black Lives Matter banners in their store windows. They provided food and refreshment to the protestors.

But then tweets that Lianne had posted in 2012, some eight years earlier when she was 15 – tweets she had deleted many years earlier – came to light. They were despicable. The original tweet said: “Top 3 races you wish to eliminate. Ready, go! Jews, blacks, and the fats.” Another tweet commented: “#IfIwasPresident I'd finish off what hitler started and rule the world.”

Lianne had a very difficult adolescence. She was the only Arab Muslim girl in a nearly all-white school. She struggled with her identity and went through what her father called “a dark time.” She attended therapeutic boarding school in Utah for two years, and turned herself around. Eventually, she came home, graduated from the University of Minnesota, and joined the family business.

When her posts resurfaced on social media, her father condemned them instantly, and publicly fired his daughter from the company. Lianne apologized on her Instagram feed. “I was so shocked that I ever posted something so offensive,” she wrote.² “I want to apologize from the bottom of my heart. They were such horrible and vile things, and that's not who I am. It's not what I believe in.... Those statements were made a long time ago. I was at a different place in my life. They in no way, shape, or form reflect who I am as a person today.”

But the apology was not enough. The posts went viral and calls for a boycott spread. Majdi's home address was posted online and the family had to evacuate their home for ten days. They lost \$5 million in contracts as major stores dropped their products - Costco, Target, Sam's Club and local Supermarket co-ops. The landlord at his biggest store cancelled their lease and

¹ From “America's Cultural Revolution”, Podcast episode *Honestly with Bari Weiss*, June 9, 2021 –

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/honestly-with-bari-weiss/id1570872415?i=1000524764029>

² <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/06/05/holy-land-grocery-ceo-fires-daughter-over-racist-social-media-posts>

they permanently closed the location. He had to lay off nearly 70 people from his businesses, many who had worked with him for more than a decade, almost all from minority backgrounds.

Tonight begins the Day of Atonement, the day when each of us are called to account for our trespasses and misdeeds. The Psalmist laments: “If You keep account of sins, dear God, Lord, who will survive?” (Psalm 130:3). This evening we attest: “We are no so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say before You, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, we are perfect and have not sinned. Rather we confess, we have sinned, we have transgressed.”

But instead of cultivating humility in the face of our limitations and flaws, it seems so often we prefer a posture of condemnation and judgment. We are quick to indict and cancel those whose opinions or beliefs we think are offensive. As Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff write in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, we build distortion fields that play on our emotions - overgeneralizing, catastrophizing, looking at things as black and white, us vs. them, shaming and blaming.

Social media algorithms are designed to promote posts that inflame outrage. A 2017 study by the Pew Research Center, showed that posts on Facebook exhibiting “indignant disagreement” received nearly twice as many likes and shares — as other types of content.³ Media outlets are replete with amped up posturing, grandstanding, indignation and virtue signaling and amazingly harsh, and even vulgar denunciations of anyone who posits ideas different from our own.

A student at Smith college said when she started college, “I witnessed countless conversations that consisted of one person telling the other that their opinion was wrong. The word ‘offensive’ was almost always included in the reasoning. ... I began to voice my opinion less often to avoid being berated and judged by a community that claims to represent the free expression of ideas. I learned, along with every other student, to walk on eggshells for fear that I may say something ‘offensive.’”⁴

At Claremont college in California, a student wrote in the campus newspaper how she, as a Latina, felt marginalized and underrepresented. A dean of the college wrote an email to reach out and console her, but the student thought the email invalidated her concerns. After posting the email online, weeks of protests, marches, and demonstrations ensued, and the dean was forced to resign.⁵ A public defender with legal aid in New York was drummed out of her job by a group of colleagues who called her “racist and openly so” because she published an op-ed saying she didn’t subscribe to certain school board policies influenced by critical race theory.⁶ And if you want to hear what cancel culture on the right looks like, ask Colin Kaepernick, Liz Cheney, or Brad Raffensberger.

In a letter to Harper’s Weekly in July of 2020, more than 150 scholars, writers, and intellectuals from across the political spectrum wrote that: “The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted ... censoriousness is ... spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public

³ “Why It Feels Like Everything Is Going Haywire” by Jonathan Haidt and Tobias Rose-Stockwell in *The Atlantic* December 2019.

⁴ Op. Cit. Lukianoff and Haidt, p. 72.

⁵ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*. New York: Penguin 2018, pp. 53-55.

⁶ <https://bariweiss.substack.com/p/a-witch-trial-at-the-legal-aid-society>

shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty.”

How do we learn to talk to each other rather than cancel each other? How do we heal these fractures and divisions that have rendered our society so polarized? How can we learn to stop demonizing each other and constantly questioning each other’s motives? How can we break the gravitational pull of polar extremes to meet each other somewhere in the middle?

Adam Grant in his book *Think Again* notes that when we try to persuade someone of our opinion or idea, we tend to fall into three kinds of mindsets: preachers, prosecutors, and politicians. Preachers pontificate and deliver sermons to advance their ideas. They will exhort you to see the truth and moral grandeur of their beliefs. Prosecutors shoot for flaws in other people’s reasoning, they build cases and amass arguments and data to prove they’re right and win their case. Politicians seek to win over their audience by pressure and persuasion, campaigning and lobbying to win someone over to their side.

But preaching, prosecuting, and politicking hardly ever work. Dr. Corky Becker from Essential Partners taught me that debate is like a game of volleyball. Your job is to slam the ball to make your opponent miss so you can score points and win the match. And no one likes to lose, so we hold fast to our opinions, even more tightly when we’re told we’re wrong.

Changing our minds becomes a mark of moral weakness, an admission of defeat. Not subscribing to the mainstream opinion of our group or community could result in ridicule, ostracism, or cancellation. The net result is people inevitably end up hardening their positions. As we learn in the Talmud in tractate Sotah, our preaching, prosecuting, and politicking makes things worse: “when those who show their arrogance by speaking too long (literally drawing out spittle) proliferated, the number of arrogant people in general proliferated, ... dispute proliferated in Israel ... and the Torah became like two Torahs.”⁷

Does it ever dawn on us that we may not have a monopoly on the truth, that people on the opposite side of a question might have something to teach us? Does it ever occur to us that the other side might actually be right?

What if we could learn to replace arrogance with humility? What if we could learn to see changing our minds as a virtue, not an admission of weakness or defeat, but as a righteous strength - an opportunity to learn and grow. What if we could learn to replace our convictions with curiosity, and judgment with inquisitiveness? What if we could replace our instinct to say, “I don’t want to hear it!” with “That’s interesting. Tell me more.”

The Pirke Avot teaches that *Kol Machloket SheHi L’Shem Shamayim, Hi Sofa L’Hitkayem* – every controversy that is for the sake of Heaven, its wisdom will endure (Pirke Avot 5:16). Real dialogue, Dr. Becker suggests, is more like a game of catch. Your job is to create a give and take with your partner to see how long you can keep going before you let the ball drop.

My teacher Rabbi Michael Chernick suggests: “When people argue for the sake of heaven they put aside ego and the need to win at all costs. By not descending into ad hominem insults and dismissal of the truth of the other participant in the argument, the parties to the argument bring to light different facets of ultimate truth. In this way, they arrive at as much truth as human beings are vouchsafed. This truth, which is the end product of a combination of

⁷ Talmud Sotah 47b

deeply held principles tempered by a willingness to yield in the face of a point of view that resonates with the mind or the heart, endures and has a powerful impact on the lives of those who hear and accept it.”⁸

We do better when we become better listeners. Grant relates a story of a woman from Montreal who gave birth to a very premature baby. Even though Montreal had seen several outbreaks of measles, the woman had decided not to have her children vaccinated. She had heard from friends and neighbors that vaccines were dangerous and could cause terrible side effects.

Studies show that when people are shown the research about the safety of vaccines, they actually become more ambivalent, rather than more accepting. “Much like a vaccine inoculates our physical immune system against a virus, the act of resistance fortifies our psychological immune system,” Grant says. “Refuting a point of view produces antibodies against future influence attempts. We become more certain of our opinions and less curious about alternative views.”⁹

Efforts by the doctors and nurses to convince her to vaccinate her newborn went nowhere. She felt like the doctors and nurses were accusing her of “wanting my kids to get sick. As if I were a bad mother.”

So the staff contacted a neonatologist named Dr. Arnaud Gagneur. He approached the new mother completely differently. Dr. Gagneur began by telling the mother that he was afraid of what might happen if her newborn got the measles, but he accepted her decision. He just wanted to understand it better. They spoke for over an hour, during which time he asked open-ended questions about how she had reached the decision not to vaccinate. He listened with respect and open curiosity, and validated her concerns. He expressed trust and appreciation for her intentions and explored their mutual motivations and beliefs in a non-threatening, non-judgmental, but open and inviting conversation.

She ultimately decided to vaccinate her baby, and her older children as well. She said that the key to her changing her mind was when he said, “whether I chose to vaccinate or not, he respected my decision as someone who wanted the best for my kids. Just that sentence – to me, it was worth all the gold in the world.”

What would have happened in Minneapolis if Lianne Wadi’s old tweets had been greeted with curiosity rather than judgment? Imagine what might have happened if the community, instead of resorting to moral condemnation and boycott had instead gone to her and said – what’s the deal with these tweets? Is that what you really think? Why did you post that? Imagine what they might have learned instead.

They might have learned that Lianne shared much of the same anguish as did so many people in her community, that loneliness and fear sometimes result in toxic hate. They might have learned that people in pain will often mask that pain by pretending to arrogance and hatred they don’t mean or feel. They might have learned that she had endured an incredibly difficult struggle to discover her authentic self, and had grown from a dark and hateful teen into a loving and aware young adult. They might have learned that she came from a family that had not only realized the American dream, but had turned around and given back to their community, and supported extraordinary causes for vulnerable people in Africa. They might have learned that

⁸ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-lost-art-of-argument-for-the-sake-of-heaven/>

⁹ Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know*. New York: Viking, 2021, pp. 143-145.

even the people who would seem to be your enemy could actually be your allies. All they would have had to do was to replace their judgment with curiosity, asked some questions with humility and understanding, and stopped screaming long enough to listen.

Curiosity does not mean avoiding conflict. It simply means approaching conflict with openness and curiosity. Wilbur and Orville Wright argued back and forth for days on how to design the propeller for their new airplane. The arguments often grew loud and hot. But throughout, they both constantly listened to each other. “Discussion,” Wilbur once said, “brings out new ways of looking at things.”

The next morning, Orville showed up at the shop first and told their mechanic that he was wrong – that they should design the propeller Wilbur’s way. Wilbur showed up later and suggested that Orville was right and his way was wrong. They then discovered that they both were wrong. At Kitty Hawk, the brothers figured out that they didn’t need a propeller – they needed two propellers, spinning in opposite directions. “In a great argument,” writes Adam Grant, “our adversary is not a foil but a propeller. With twin propellers spinning in divergent directions, our thinking doesn’t get stuck on the ground; it takes flight.”¹⁰

We call our God One, because it is only in God’s realm that all truth can be known. In this new year, let us cultivate the humility to cast aside judgment and embrace curiosity. Let us be willing to rethink our assumptions, and to open our hearts to new ideas and new truths. Let us reject the impulse to self-righteous indignation and self-certitude and instead seek out opportunities for dialogue and learning. The more open we are to growing in our understanding and appreciation for the truths shared by others, the closer we may draw to God in our own lives, and the more Godly will be the world we create together.

¹⁰ Op. Cit. Grant, pp. 91-93.