

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon – Sunday, September 25, 2022

Rabbi Mari Chernow

Title: Just as Iron Sharpens Iron

My good friend, Rabbi Michael Holzman, believes that American democracy is going to be saved by synagogues. And churches. And mosques. And community centers. And clubs. And other local affinity groups in which people have to figure out how to get along. And make decisions. And navigate a world that is changing day by day, sometimes second by second. He believes that if we can build a community in here that is safe and healthy and thriving and strong. And open-minded, and values-driven and inspiring. And chock full of disagreement. Then we can learn to do it out there.

As many of you know, I spent eighteen years as a rabbi in Arizona. I loved that community dearly *and* I had to be very, very deliberate about what I said from the bimah. The congregation had a liberal majority and a serious multiplicity of opinions. I did not censor myself, but I crafted every sentence, sometimes every word. I spent hours working through my thoughts, in order to find the very precise and nuanced point that I wanted to make. I did not add even a breath of rhetoric that I could not defend because I would surely find myself defending every single word. There were times when this was infuriating. On the other hand, I was deeply proud of those skills that I was forced develop. When I spoke out on a topic that was controversial, my goal was to hold my ground, and to say what I need to say – *and* to do so in a way that if someone disagreed with me, they would still call me the next day if they needed a rabbi to do a funeral.

We are supposed to be able to disagree, right? The Bible has a vision for how that works. It says, “Just as iron sharpens iron, so a person sharpens the wit of their friend.”<sup>1</sup> Our opinions collide. We shape ourselves against each other. Maybe we even wear each other down a bit. And there’s a purpose to that exchange – that we emerge more refined, more

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 27:17. Literally, “As iron sharpens iron, so a person sharpens the face of their friend.”

precise, better. The Talmud<sup>2</sup> elaborates that this teaching applies to Torah scholars, who have fierce disputes. They also have intense and lasting relationships.

That's what I learned to do in Arizona. And I'm worried that we're losing that capacity – our ability to sharpen one another. And our willingness to be sharpened. Our democracy depends on it. Just as surely as it depends on fairness, access, and broad participation. Let's back up for a minute and talk about that. We will come back to the interpersonal, which is what I really want to talk about, but I can't address democracy without making a few comments about our larger landscape.

There are those who seek to consolidate and manipulate the power that truly belongs to the people. The hundreds of anti-voting bills introduced in states in recent years<sup>3</sup> are antithetical to the Talmud's teaching that one must have the consent of the community in order to appoint a leader.<sup>4</sup> They are antithetical to the hard-won victories of America's past 150 years. The trend has been and should be *increasing* access to voting, its fairness and its impact. Think about women's suffrage, voting rights, civil rights and the direct election of senators. That trajectory makes any effort at voter suppression both frightening and offensive. I hope you'll join the Social Justice Symposium on October 19 on this very topic.

Equally disturbing is the fact that our representative government is becoming less and less...representative. Some of this was written into the Constitution intentionally, when framers were struggling with a different set of issues around fairness. In today's world, while the electoral college, the nature of the Senate and the frozen number of representatives in House were once the solution, they are now the problem. For example, among the many ways in which we are polarized, we are becoming increasingly separated geographically. It is predicted that as people move to more populated states, "by 2040, about 70 per cent of Americans ... will have only 30 senators representing them, while the remaining 30 percent...will have 70 senators representing them."<sup>5</sup> Add to that a willingness to defy

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<sup>2</sup> Ta'anit 7a.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/block-the-vote-voter-suppression-in-2020>

<sup>4</sup> Brachot 55a.

<sup>5</sup> David Birdsell, Dean of the School of Public and International Affairs at Baruch College, as quoted in <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/11/28/by-2040-two-thirds-of-americans-will-be-represented-by-30-percent-of-the-senate/>

convention and cast off decency in confirming supreme court justices and you end up with a lot of extremely powerful people with no accountability to the public. And – not surprisingly – those who have been underrepresented throughout American history only stand to become more disenfranchised. And those who benefit from this imbalance have been and will be vehemently opposed to measures that would correct it. We will have to take this on.

But here's the thing. It's the High Holidays. We can't show up to talk only about what somebody else is doing wrong. It would be absurd to come back ten days from now, on Yom Kippur, to confess "You sinned. You erred. You made mistakes." Or, frankly, "They sinned. They erred. They made mistakes." We have to look at our side of the street. We have to admit that we too, are part of a deeply broken system and there are ways in which we benefit from it.

We will participate as the country address our democracy problem on the national level. We'll have some soul searching to do. But what I want to talk about today is the work we can do right here. In these seats. On the human being-to-human being level. Where we have a polarization problem.

Writer and mediator Amanda Ripley distinguishes between good conflict and high conflict. In good conflict, there is a useful friction..."<sup>6</sup> she writes, "it's a force that pushes us to be better people. Good conflict ... has nothing to do with surrender. It can be stressful and heated, but our dignity remains intact. Good conflict does not collapse into caricature. We remain open to the reality that none of us has the answers to everything all the time."

In high conflict. "The normal rules of engagement no longer apply. Each conflict with the other side becomes more charged. The brain behaves differently. We feel increasingly certain of our own superiority and at the same time, more and more mystified by the other side..."<sup>7</sup>

Sound a bit familiar?

There is reason to be mystified. And indignant. But could we learn to keep it on this side of contempt?<sup>8</sup> And scorn? There are limits, to be sure. No one is required to stay in relationship

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<sup>6</sup> Location 118 of 5884, kindle edition.

<sup>7</sup> Location 125 of 5884, kindle edition.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/opinion/sunday/political-polarization.html>

with someone who is cruel, oppressive or denies them rights. But as Micah Goodman teaches, “a polarized world is a world that has lost its curiosity.”<sup>9</sup> Could we regain some curiosity?

The goal of good conflict is not to capitulate or compromise but rather to “become capable of comprehending that with which [we] still disagree.” That is the *very* reason the Talmud gives that the arguments of the school of Hillel nearly always prevail over the arguments of the school of Shammai.<sup>10</sup> These were two opposing thought leaders who set policy in their time. Why did the school of Hillel prevail? Because they were agreeable, forbearing, and could teach the opposing arguments as well as they could teach their own. Maybe even better. The Talmud doesn’t tell us if it praises that approach because it is the kind, decent, and relational thing to do or if it is simply pragmatic. As Amanda Ripley explains, one paradox of resolving high conflict is that “No one will change in the ways you want them to until they believe you understand and accept *them* for who they are right now.”<sup>11</sup> That *is* a paradox. One way to potentially, eventually, win an argument is to try... not winning. No one will change the ways you want them to until they believe that you understand and accept them for who they are right now.

Michael Marmor teaches that the angel of learning and the angel of victory cannot be in the same room at the same time.<sup>12</sup> You have to decide which one you are going to invite in. There are times for victory. And there are times for learning. And for shared humanity and seeing the struggles of the other side. Which we are not going to get on cable news. Or Instagram. Or twitter. We are only going to get it by looking into each other’s eyes, telling our stories, and listening.

That’s where the synagogue comes in. I don’t want us to talk about the High Holidays. I want us to *do* the High Holidays. Which means going inside. Stretching. Thinking and feeling the things that are hard to think and to feel. I’m inviting you to spend a few hours during these weeks reading with me. The stories of two synagogues that are deeply dedicated to good conflict. I don’t have a grand plan for how we’ll apply their methods to TIOH. I like to dive into

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<sup>9</sup> In <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVF1e9JYtBU>

<sup>10</sup> Eruvin 13b

<sup>11</sup> Location 48 of 5884, kindle edition.

<sup>12</sup> Based on a teaching by Abraham Joshua Heschel.

ideas during the holidays. And I'd like to dive into them with you. A brief highlight from each community.

The first is the one Rabbi Holzman leads in Northern Virginia. The community had to decide whether or not to join a political rally in Washington DC. The congregation leans left and this rally was in line with that. They had plenty of popular support for going but Rabbi Holzman knew that simply renting the busses to go would deepen polarization and leave some members feeling excluded. So he created a process for discussion and decision making. In the end, they rented the busses. They went to DC. But the people who disagreed felt heard. They respected the decision and supported it.

A cornerstone of their process is a type of convening that is more than town hall. It includes ritual, music, a Jewish text that models a multiplicity of opinions, and deep listening. The centerpiece is when congregants tell stories about how the issue at hand has affected them personally. And after each story, everyone responds with complete silence except for one word, "Shamati." I heard you."

Let's pause on that for a minute. This practice is completely antithetical to how dialogue takes place in the public square. Can you imagine a political conversation in which the only thing that an opponent says to you is "shamati"? Can you imagine hearing the story of someone with whom you disagree and saying "shamati." I heard you. Could that become the tone of *our* public square?

The second community is Bnai Jeshurun –BJ – in New York City.<sup>13</sup> About ten years ago, the rabbis issued a statement on Israel. While many in the community applauded the position, others took deep offense. Long-time members resigned and accused the rabbis of tearing the Jewish people apart. They decided to apply what Amanda Ripley calls "a fourth way". In any high conflict situation, we typically consider three choices. Fight. Flight. Or go silent. And indeed, the senior rabbi considered leaving BJ. He thought about standing his ground until everyone who disagreed left. And he thought about keeping his mouth shut, no longer sharing his beliefs on Israel and other controversial issues. But knowing that disagreement is necessary

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<sup>13</sup> Based on chapter 7 in *High Conflict*.

for growth, he chose a fourth way instead. They hired mediators and met in groups of about 40 people over the course of several months.

The community learned how to create conditions for “conflict resilience – an ability to not just absorb conflict but grow stronger from it.” They went through a similar process when the rabbis considered changing a controversial internal synagogue policy.

And then, they took these methods they had learned to enter conflict - calmly, respectfully, honorably – to a group people with whom they had a much more toxic disagreement.

BJ developed a relationship with a community in rural Michigan. Many participants there worked as corrections officers in a local prison. They were mostly Christian. Some had never met a Jew. They were politically conservative and most of them had voted for Trump. When they gathered, the New Yorkers expected to be met with bigotry. The Michiganders with condescension. And both were surprised. The ground rules included: “We’re going to take seriously the things everyone holds dear. We’re not going to try to convince each other [they’re] wrong. And we’re going to be curious.”

You can read about the exchanges that they had. Did they change anybody’s vote? I don’t know. But a BJ congregant working on reforming the criminal justice system realized for the first time that corrections officers could be partners, not enemies, in that process. And when the horrific shooting occurred at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, three of the Michiganders got on a plane to attend Shabbat services at BJ, where they read a long and powerful letter of support, demanding better from our country. They said, “We must stop this before America stops being America.”

I want us to sharpen each other. We will all be better for it. I want us to rail passionately against the injustices in our system. And at the very same time, I want us to listen, tolerate disagreement, and embrace good and healthy conflict. Let’s start by reading these stories together. You can link to them on our website and there are 100 copies of Amanda Ripley’s book in the lobby if you want to take one home right now. We’ll talk about them at Tuesdays with Mari on October 18. And I know. I just told you to come to the Social Justice Symposium on the 19<sup>th</sup>, which you should do. We’ll be talking about democracy from different angles two nights in a row.

Because while I don't know if Mike is right. That synagogues can save American democracy, it sure seems worth a try. You know, some of things that those who teach about reducing polarization call for – long-form thinking, taking time and creating space, complicating the narrative. Those are in our wheelhouse. I mean, we've literally been talking about the fact that chickens don't produce milk and what that means for keeping kosher for 2,000 years. We know how to go deep.

So here's to the synagogues. And churches. And mosques. And community centers. And clubs. And affinity groups. That are learning how to get along. And make decisions. And navigate a world that is changing day by day, sometimes second by second. Here's to all those working to build communities that are safe and healthy and thriving and strong. And open-minded, and values-driven and inspiring. And chock full of disagreement. Let's be sure we're on that list.

Shana Tova U'metuhah.