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Tifereth Israel Synagogue
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**Where Do We Go From Here?
Kol Nidre – 5776**

A few weeks ago I attended an AIPAC Rabbinic pre-High Holy Day Seminar in Washington, D.C.

One of the speakers was Leon Wieseltier, a nationally known Jewish writer and thinker. For several years he was the literary editor of The New Republic. He is currently the Isaiah Berlin Senior Fellow in Culture and Policy at the Brookings Institution. He also writes for the Atlantic.

One of the rabbis asked Wieseltier what he suggested rabbis tell their congregations about the pending Iran deal during the High Holy Days.

Wieseltier frowned and said that he doesn't come to High Holy Day services to hear about politics or current events. He comes to ponder the timeless and the spiritual.

While I do not agree that matters of contemporary worldly concern should be off the table during the holidays, I do agree that speaking about the Iran deal tonight would be counterproductive. It's not that I have second thoughts about the deal; I am still opposed to it. But the Talmud teaches that once a woman is pregnant, you should not pray for her to give birth to

a boy or a girl. Why? Because that decision has already been made, and your prayer would be a meaningless act.

It is clear that the President has enough votes to make it happen, so like it or not, the agreement with Iran is a done deal. To continue to protest the Iran deal tonight would rile up its detractors and anger its supporters, and ruin every one's holiday.

So instead, let's talk about its aftermath. What now? Where do we go from here?"

I am not going to speak tonight about the political, diplomatic, economic, or military fall-out from the nuclear pact with Iran. I am more concerned about how to bring about the reconciliation and healing that is so sorely needed within the Jewish community.

The debate over the Iran deal has been characterized by divisiveness, anger, and even hatred within the Jewish community. You could feel the rancor in newspaper and television ads, in sermons, and in everyday conversations. At times the conversations and accusations have been ugly.

On August 28, 2015 an article appeared in the New York Times with the headline: "Iran Deal Opens a Vitriolic Divide Among American Jews." The article details some of the despicable language and acts that have

been perpetrated against politicians and others, both those for and those against the agreement.

Congressman Jerrold Nadler of New York, who is Jewish and a longtime friend of Israel, was one of the early public supporters of the Iran deal. As a result, a post on his Facebook page labeled him a kapo: a Jew who collaborated with Nazis in the World War II. Another post said that he had “blood on his hands.” Another said he had “facilitated Obama’s holocaust.”

According to the Times: “Dov Hikind, a New York State assemblyman, rented a double-decker bus...; plastered the smiling face of Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on it; and parked it in front of Mr. Nadler’s office...Then, when groups including the Anti-Defamation League, which opposes the Iran deal, told him to back off, he delivered a mocking sympathy card and teddy bear....”

Opponents of the deal were not immune to attack either. The Daily Kos, a liberal website portrayed Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer of New York as a traitorous rat for coming out against the deal. Opponents of the deal have been accused of having dual loyalties and selling out the US.

Here in the synagogue, I have not heard such vitriol but there are undeniable strong feelings about the Iran deal and many other political

issues. You can lengthen the breakfast that is served after daily minyan each day from twenty minutes to an hour and a-half simply by saying: Israel, Palestine, Iran, or Obama.

Unfortunately, ad hominem attacks and coarse, hateful, and vulgar language have become the common coin of public disputes today. This hateful language immediately changes what may be a reasonable and legitimate disagreement into a personal attack.

Someone who supports the Iran deal is anti-Israel. The Jew who criticizes Israel's policies on the Palestinians is a "Nazi." All Arabs are terrorists. President Barak Hussein Obama is a Muslim. The examples go on and on.

Unfortunately, the Jewish community seems to be taking its cues from the general society in which we live. Political discourse, in particular, has become offensive, vile, and rude.

I am not taking a political position, and without mentioning names, I cringe when I hear a national presidential candidate say things like: "Jonah Goldberg of the once great National Review is truly dumb as a rock. Why does Bret Baier put this dummy on his show?" or "Fox viewers give low marks to bimbo Megyn Kelly...!" or "'Look at that face!," the magazine quoted Trump as saying. "Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine

that, the face of our next president. I mean, she's a woman, and I'm not s'posedta say bad things, but really, folks, come on. Are we serious?"

Is this the tenor of the political debate we should be having in this country? Enough said.

Our tradition encourages diversity of opinion and disagreement. We are supposed to keep an open mind and listen to those with whom we differ and evaluate their arguments. Two Jews and three opinions is the Jewish way. But there is also a Jewish way to disagree.

A colleague shared with me his interpretation of well-known Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd."

In the middle of the Psalm it says, "You have placed a table before me in the presence of my enemies." At face value it appears to mean that God has favored us by giving us a table of blessing and plenty in the presence of our enemies. But there is another way to look at it. A table can be used for a meal, but it also can be used as a physical meeting place for discussion and negotiation.

Perhaps what the Psalmist was saying is that God puts a table, an opportunity for discussion and debate, between us and our adversaries to encourage us to meet, listen, talk, debate, and resolve our disputes peacefully. When we disagree, either privately or publicly, there are lines of

civility and *derech eretz*, proper behavior, that we need to respect. There are better ways of dealing with disagreements than by waging war, trading barbs, or hurling insults.

When it comes to disagreement within the Jewish community, it is not only the content but the way we disagree that should concern us. Do those who disagree on a subject treat their opponents with respect and kindness, or do they belittle and humiliate them? Does a dispute and the way it is conducted help the Jewish community reexamine and analyze its positions on issues, or does it divide and tear us apart? Is a disagreement *l'sheim shamayim*, for the sake of Heaven, or not *l'sheim shamayim* – not for the sake of heaven?

The Talmud asks: “What is an example of a disagreement for the sake of heaven? The disagreements of Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of a disagreement not for the sake of heaven? The disagreements of Korach and his followers.”

After the Exodus, an Israelite named Korach led an uprising against Moses and Aaron. He wanted to remove them from leadership and make himself ruler instead.

In order to prove himself and Aaron as the legitimate rulers of Israel, Moses challenged Korach to a "duel." Korach and Aaron would each offer

incense to God. Whosever's incense God accepted was the true leader of Israel. The loser would die an unnatural death.

God accepted Aaron's offering, but the earth opened up and swallowed Korach and his followers. This was unequivocal proof that Moses and Aaron were the legitimate rulers and Korach was not!

Our sages called this a dispute *lo lasheim shamayim*, not for the sake of heaven. Korach and his followers did not challenge Moses' and Aaron's leadership because they were illegitimate rulers or doing a bad job. Rather, they rallied the Israelites against them for wholly self-serving interests. Korach believed that if he could convince the Israelites that Moses and Aaron were lacking legitimacy, the top job would be his. Korach was not trying to unite the people and bring them heavenward, but to divide each against their neighbor.

The disagreements of Hillel and Shammai and their disciples were a different story. The Talmud records over 300 disputes between *Beit Hillel*, the disciples of Hillel and *Beit Shammai*, the disciples of Shammai. Yet the members of these two academies, who so often disagreed on *halachic*, Jewish legal, issues maintained peaceful and friendly relationships with each other.

The Talmud records: “Although *Beit Shammai* and *Beit Hillel* disagreed, *Beit Shammai* did not abstain from marrying women of the families of *Beit Hillel*, nor did *Beit Hillel* refrain from marrying those of *Beit Shammai*. This is to teach you that they showed love and friendship toward one another, thus putting into practice the scriptural text, [Heb] “Love truth and peace.” (Zech. 8:16)

The arguments of Hillel and Shammai were not like those of the Hatfields and the McCoy's, who attacked each other for many years. Hillel's and Shammai's disputes were *L'sheim Shamayim*, for the sake of heaven, for the sake of bringing the community closer to God and following God's will. Although they disagreed sharply on how exactly how one accomplished that, they remained friends and colleagues, attended each other's *simchas*, and ate in each other's home. Their differences were always motivated by their desire to discern and follow God's will, rather than ego or power.

Today the disagreements within the Jewish community sound more like the Hatfields and the McCoy's than they do Hillel and Shammai. There are lots of raised voices and an enmity that I have not seen before. The name-calling and hateful language are reaching new heights, or perhaps I

should say new depths, and threatening to divide us and pull us apart. We are already a small minority. When we attack each other we do the work of our enemies.

Our tradition says that Jews should be an *or l'goyim*, a light unto the nations. When we respect God's law and each other, we become role models of holiness, respect, and love.

My grandparents didn't use the phrase *or l'goyim*, a light unto the nations, but they did use a *Yiddish* phrase that sounds kind of similar. They spoke often about something being "*a shanda fur die goyim*." *Shanda* means "embarrassment" and *goyim* used non-pejoratively means nations. *A shanda fur die goyim* is the *Yiddish* phrase used when Jews do something embarrassing in front of their non-Jewish neighbors.

When we merit a headline in the New York Times that reads: "Iran Deal Opens a Vitriolic Divide among American Jews," it is embarrassing for the Jews. The world is intrigued and amused when we tear each other apart. It's hard to be seen as noble when you scuffle with each other in the gutter.

The Jewish community, and we its members, do not have to speak in one voice. I am well aware of the old UJA slogan, "We are One," and I am also aware that this, for the most part, is not true.

We are not all the same and we do not always agree, but that's encouraged by our tradition. If Abraham could argue with God, why can't we argue with each other? However, when we do disagree we need to do so with humility, courtesy, and respect. We need to lower the volume, change the tone, and eliminate the vilification and name-calling. We need to conduct ourselves as did the disciples of Hillel and Shammai, disagreeing, but disagreeing with love and compassion.

Earlier I mentioned the heated discussions – OK, arguments – that sometimes go on at *minyan* breakfast. There are lots of raised voices and passionate opinions. But do you know what? Afterwards, everyone still speaks to their neighbor and everyone is still friends. And everyone comes to pray at 7:30 a.m. each to make a *minyan*, not because the breakfast is so good – though it is, but because they feel responsible for the wellbeing and welfare of the community in all of its glorious diversity.

When we disagree let us do so in the same spirit. Let us disagree with kindness and reason and not with verbal smack downs or insults. Let the goal of all of our disagreements be how better to strengthen the Jewish people, to heal the world, and to serve God.