Respect Opposition

The Iran nuclear debate - exposed a strategic, military threat to Israel – and the Iran nuclear debate - exposed a communal threat to the American Jewish community. Last week’s headline in the Jewish Herald Voice read, “Rabbi Petitions show community divide over Iran deal.” To be honest, I wasn’t going to speak about the Iran deal today. But, as I read that headline, the conversation suddenly expanded from being a political issue to being a community issue. I actually wrote a different sermon for today about contemporary theology – our relationship with God, maybe I’ll email it out after RH. Although it is about God, so I suppose I could reuse it next year – or any time before the mashiach arrives.

The headline read “Rabbi Petitions show community divide over Iran deal.” The words ‘community divide’ rattled my neshama – rattled my soul. The Jewish people have a history of community divide. You know the story about the Jewish man who was rescued from a desert island. When they rescued him, they found that he had built two shuls on the tiny island. After they revived him, they asked, “We understand why you built one shul, to pray and connect with God. But, why did you build two shuls?” He pointed over to one shul, “Do you see that shul over there? That one is my shul. That one over there? That’s the other shul. Even if my life depended on it, I wouldn’t step one foot into that shul!

The Jewish community has a history of division. Brith Shalom has a history of division. There are issues right now, in the Houston community, about division. And so I read the headline about community divide with deep concern for our community. And I read the headline with deep concern me, because, it was a week before Rosh Hashannah, and I had to write a new sermon.

The article reported that there were rabbinic petitions circulating against the agreement and there were rabbinic petitions circulating for the agreement. There were Jewish politicians voting against the agreement and there were Jewish politicians voting for the agreement. There were majority voices and there were minority voices. On this issue, we are a community divided. The news reports that there are 28 Jewish members of Congress – that’s 15 % - which is crazy, given that Jews are only 2.2% of Americans. A majority of those 28 Jewish members of congress oppose the deal - a minority of them support the deal – it seems to be around 2/3 and 1/3. And each side is questioning the loyalty of the other. The 2/3 majority
voices, those who oppose the deal, have been called treasonous by the opposition. By opposing this deal, that the President and Secretary of State worked out, they are accused of choosing their loyalty to Israel over their Congressional duties to support the United States. The 1/3 minority Jewish voices in support of the deal, have been called enemies of the State of Israel and some received death threats at their homes. That kind of rhetoric - that kind of attitude on both sides of the debate – polarizes a democracy and divides a community. That kind of language pushes people away from Israel, instead of drawing them near.

That’s the news report. So here’s my rabbinic report. No matter what happens in Congress – no matter how the President responds, no matter how you feel about the Iran deal, it is critically important that we stand united in support of Israel – united as a Brith Shalom community, united as a Houston Jewish community, an American Jewish community and united as a Jewish People – One people with one heart - am echad im lev echad. We may be divided on the Iran Deal and that hurts because it’s a matter of critical strategic importance, but we can’t be divided in our support for Israel. Israel deserves a cohesive, supportive American Jewish Community. No more division and no tearing apart, this is a moment to unite! This is moment to support each other and support Israel. And so, especially in our time of great angst, we pause and take a rosh hashannah reflective moment - about the sanctity of Democracy and the challenges of the democratic process, so that we can navigate this issue as a community, and come out even stronger in our support of Israel.

One of the key reasons we feel so strongly about Israel, is because Israel is a bastion – an outpost of freedom and democracy in the Middle East. We’re Americans and we’re Jews. We have democracy in our DNA from both sides. Americans have both lost their lives fighting for Democracy. Jews have lost their lives fighting for Democracy. And so, as Americans and Jews, we’re doubly invested in democracy. The reason that our shul has a board and a constitution and elections is because we believe in the sanctity of the democratic process. And so, for our sake, Israel’s sake, for God’s sake, for our children’s sake – let’s spend a little time this Rosh Hashannah figuring out how function better in a democratic debate – without ripping our community apart. And if we can integrate that wisdom, we’ll have a united support for Israel and we’ll build stronger Jewish institutions – here and everywhere – for now and for the future.
Judaism embraced the Democratic process, thousands of years ago, in Jewish courts of law and in the academy of study, the bet midrash. The Torah instructs us, Lean toward the majority - Acharei rabim l’hatot. Rabbi David Weiss Halivni explains, “The governing system of acharei rabim l’hatot, of following majority opinion reflects the divinely sanctions human factor in the rabbinic decision making. We are empowered and commissioned by God to consummate the process of revelation.” God gave us the Torah, and we partner with God through the democratic process. But, democracy is a human institution, and the democratic process is messy, and so the Talmud is filled with stories of the challenges of democracy.

One day, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer were arguing about the kashruth of a certain oven. They were each campaigning fiercely for their position. The arguments got heated, and Rabbi Eliezer was trailing in the polls – and he was in a panic. He knew beyond a shadow of a shadow of a doubt that he was right, and they were all wrong. And so, Rabbi Eliezer turned to God Above for support. And God supported him. After a series of fairly substantial Divine miracles, finally a definitive voice from heaven – a bat kol – shook the walls of the academy – “In matters of kashrut - Rabbi Eliezer is always right”. After the endorsement for God, they voted again, and he still couldn’t get a majority. Even with God on his side, the votes weren’t there. The Rabbis concluded, it’s not heaven, Lo Bashamayim hee – it’s not in heaven – legal matters aren’t decided by God, they are decided in the voting booths. The decision-making process is fallible, but it’s ours. Rabbi Eliezer couldn’t handle the fallibility and the sages couldn’t handle the disruption, and so Rabbi Eliezer was banished from academy. Talmudic legend has it that his pain was so real, and his pain was so true, that when he cried out to God the gates of heaven opened. His tears flooded the fields, his tears caused tidal waves to erupt on the ocean, and ultimately, his tearful prayers killed Raban Gamliel, the head of the academy that had him banished.

In a Democracy, there are winners and losers, and that causes frustration and pain. An effective democracy is a fragile and sensitive organism. An effective Democratic process is a delicate balance of passionate, oppositional debate and commitment to a unified whole. The challenge of Democracy is in the opposition. Leading without opposition is no great accomplishment. Leading by shutting down and destroying the
opposition doesn’t require any great *chochma*. That’s not democracy, that’s dictatorship. The challenge of the democratic process is integrating the opposition – even when you win and they lose – to integrate the opposition.

The parliamentary system has the best name for the minority opposition – do you know what they’re called? The loyal opposition. Why are they called the “loyal opposition”? It’s because the opposition is vulnerable. The opposition is vulnerable to being accused of disloyalty and treason. And so, they embed their loyalty right there in the name of the opposition so that we don’t go there. The opposition is loyal to the process. The opposition is loyal to the majority leader. Yes, the opposition has a different strategy and a different political framework. But, the opposition is loyal to the cause and loyal to the purpose. Here’s the challenge, the minority loses a lot, because they don’t have the votes. And losing makes people sensitive. So, to stay in the game, to stay engaged – without getting extreme, without polarizing, and without breaking off, they need to feel respected and heard. The challenge is to defeat the opposition, without destroying the opposition. Because without a loyal opposition, you don’t have democracy.

Whether we like it or not, we are an American Jewish community that is conflicted on politics – we are independent thinkers - we have majorities and minorities - hawks and doves, democrats and republicans, those who support same-sex marriage, those who oppose same-sex marriage. Whenever we debate or express opinion without respect for the opposition, we undermine our Jewish values and our democratic ideals.

We want minority voices heard so that the majority can integrate their perspective, address their issues and fix their concerns. We want minority voices heard because they protect the integrity of the democratic process. We want minority voices heard because, as American Jews, we’re a minority, and we’ll always be a minority - so we have self-interest in protecting the rights of the minority in our sacred and fragile democratic process.

Resh Lakish was a highway robber with incredible physical strength and ferocity. Rabbi Yochanan was a rabbi with incredible spiritual strength and beauty. Resh Lakish accosted Rabbi Yochanan and during the attack, Rabbi Yochanan persuaded Resh Lakish, his attacker, to change his ways.
Rabbi Yochanan groomed Resh Lakish into a formidable, Jewish scholar. He molded him into the ultimate study partner, the ultimate chavruta. They would sit across from each other in the academy and they would disagree on everything. Resh Lakish had the fresh perspective of a newcomer. Rabbi Yochanan had the deep perspective of an insider. They pushed each other and they challenged each other and they loved each other.

One day, they were engaged in a particularly heated debate about the ritual purity of steel weapons. And Rabbi Yochanan crossed a line. Rabbi Yochanan fired a personal attack on Resh Lakish, “Well, if anyone should know about weapons of destruction, it would be you. When you were a highway robber, weapons of destruction were the tools of your trade!” Resh Lakish was hurt, embarrassed and mortified – literally – mortally, emotionally wounded. His world collapsed, he fell ill, and a week later, he died. After weeks and months of mourning, Rabbi Yochanan came back to the academy, and the rabbis set him up with a new study partner. It didn’t last long. After the first day of learning, he fired him and requested a new study partner. Everyone patiently understood. It would be a process to come back to learning. The next day, the new study partner, lasted till lunch. The following day, new study partner, didn’t last 5 minutes. They approached Rabbi Yochanan, “We know how much you loved Resh Lakish, and we all miss him, but if you’re going to continue learning in the academy, you’re going to have to find a new study partner. How can we help?” Rabbi Yochanan cried and said, “All of these “study partners” you bring to me. They agree with everything I say. They say, yes, how brilliant. Yes, that makes so much sense! Oh how I long for Resh Lakish! On every matter, Resh Lakish would challenge me 49 times and I would have to come up with 50 different answers! Each and every matter was illuminated to its fullest.” He never found another study partner. Rabbi Yochanan, too, died shortly after.

In any genuinely democratic process, tempers will flare. When you’re passionate about a subject you love, and you’re being challenged, the adrenalin starts to flow. But, if the fighting gets personal, if the fighting gets nasty, then the opposition is going to get hurt and disengage – and then the democratic process fails and we all lose.

In the Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, Rabbi Kahana of the Talmud, said: If the court unanimously votes guilty, the accused is set free. If a court case
gets to the Jewish Supreme court, and the court issues a unanimous guilty
decision – defendant walks free. Judaism rejects unanimity. Why?
Unanimity, unanimous votes are suspect. Proper court cases that make it
all the way to the Supreme Court are necessarily complex and multi-facted.
If the vote is simple and unanimous, something went wrong. The
arguments aren’t being presented properly. Emotions are getting in the
way of good judgment. There is some collusion in the courtroom.
Opposition, dissention is a necessary ingredient of a Jewish democratic
process. Judaism rejects unanimity.

As story is told of The President of the Board went to visit the Rabbi
in the hospital. The rabbi went through a difficult surgery and was resting
comfortably. The President sat down at the Rabbi’s bedside and the said,
“At the board meeting last night, the synagogue board passed a motion to
wish you a refuah shleimah and a speedy recovery. The vote was 17 to 6 -
two abstentions. Refuah Shleimah.”

Democracy rules according to the majority. Democracy succeeds
according to the minority. Even if you think they’re wrong. Even if you think
they’re naïve. Even if you think they’re misinformed. An effective, unifying
democratic process demands that we integrate the opposition – even when
they lose.

Our mystical, Kabbalistic tradition teaches that all is God, but nothing
is monolithic. Everything contains multiplicity and tension and opposition –
the human brain, the cosmos, even God contains the ten sefirot – ten
different aspects of the Divine. Our beautiful, unified world isn’t uniform
and static, it is in constant motion fueled by the inner tension of opposing
forces: good and evil, light and dark, Shabbat and weekday, judgment and
grace. We, too, human beings are pulled by a multiplicity of inclinations in
our mind, body and soul - our good inclinations and our evil inclinations.
The spiritual challenge is to walk your path, not by destroying the
opposition, but by integrating the opposition. Our prayers on Rosh
HaShanah and Yom Kippur, reference our opposition, the evil inclination.
We NEVER pray for the evil opposition to disappear. We never pray to
destroy our evil inclination. We never even pray to weaken our Yetzer hara.
We pray to integrate our opposition to do God’s work. In our morning
prayers, we say, bend our will to serve You - V’khof et yitzreinu lehishtabed
lach. The Ba’al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, used to say that true
repentance, true Teshuvah, means looking within our souls and seeing the
sparks of goodness within everything. See the goodness even within our sins – even within our opposition. Integrate your opposition.

Ribono shel Olam, Source of All, we call you Lord of Hosts, Adonai Tzvaot. You are One, You are all. You are both plural and singular. You integrate all into One with the dynamic tension of diversity and multiplicity and oppositional forces. You have empowered us to create our own system of democracy to replicate Your world of many and one. You took us out of Egypt to become free people. Remind us to honor freedom by embracing the democratic process. Strengthen us to protect Israel in its fight for democracy and freedom. Teach us to argue and to support, to fight and to heal, teach us to talk and to listen. Teach us to integrate opposition. And together we say: Amen.