Placing Relationship Above Difference
Kol Nidre 5786
Rabbi Ita Paskind
Congregation Beth El, Norwalk

You know that joke about the Jewish guy stranded on the island who built 2 synagogues–one for praying in, and one he'd never set foot in?!

And how about the one about the synagogue whose members fought *every single* Shabbat about whether to stand or sit for the Shma… and it turns out that the tradition wasn't to sit, or to stand, but to argue about it?!

We love a good disagreement—but at this moment in history we face divisions that aren't funny at all. Politics, Israel, gun laws, reproductive rights, free speech… these rifts cut through our families and friendships. On this holiest night, we are not just thinking about the ways that we ourselves have missed the mark, but we are also carrying the weight of our fractured society reflected in our personal relationships.

On this Kol Nidre night, when we stand together to release old vows and open ourselves to new beginnings, we ask: How *can* we overcome this polarization? How *can* we foster relationships across very serious differences and divides?

AND this evening, I'm here to remind us that disagreement-with-connection is as old as Judaism itself, and to offer some practical guidance. I will share 3 stories, each offering a different lesson as it models these complex emotions with dexterity.

The first story comes from the Talmud[1], and it concerns 2 men, Rabbi Meir and his teacher, Elisha ben Avuya. In this story, Elisha ben Avuya is called by a different name–*Acher*, "The Other"--because he famously turned away from Judaism as an apostate, and the editors of the Talmud made sure to let that be known so we wouldn't follow his example. You may have read about him in Milton Steinberg's book *As A Driven Leaf*. Here's the story:

> There was once an incident involving *Acher*, who was riding on a horse on Shabbat, and Rabbi Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah from him. After a while, *Acher* said to him: Meir, turn back, for I have already estimated

[1] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chagigah 15a

> and measured according to the steps of my horse that the Shabbat boundary ends here, and you may therefore venture no further. Rabbi Meir said to him: You, too, return to the correct path. He said to him: But have I not already told you that I have already heard behind the dividing curtain: "*Shuvu*, Return, rebellious children," apart from *Acher*?

Let's unpack this. Rabbi Meir is walking behind his treasured teacher, Elisha ben Avuya, as was the custom of all students to walk behind their teachers and glean their wisdom. Unlike the typical student/teacher Shabbat walk, here, the teacher is riding a horse–a big Shabbat no-no. Rabbi Meir should write him off just for that, but he seems certain that Acher still has important Torah to teach. And he does. From atop his horse, Acher has been keeping track of how far Rabbi Meir can walk until he reaches the *techum Shabbat*, the Shabbat boundary.

The last exchange of this meeting is precious, and so important for our conversation this evening. Even as Elisha ben Avuya urges Rabbi Meir to return along the physical path home, Rabbi Meir urges his teacher to return to Jewish life and law. Despite their sharp dissent about the role of Jewish law, Rabbi Meir sees this teacher, a father-figure of sorts, as so essential to his life that he is *willing* to keep him close, *desperate* to keep him close. And Elisha ben Avuya, who has left the fold, clearly cares so much about his student that he goes out of his way to ensure that Rabbi Meir stays on the path of halacha, Jewish law–the path he knows his student values tremendously.

These great men parted ways physically, but not in respect or affection.

The second story comes from the Medieval period in the Middle East. Starting in the 7th-9th centuries, there was a substantial group of Jews who did not accept the authority of rabbinic Judaism, and instead relied solely on biblical law to understand how to live. They called themselves Karaites, from the word *mikra*, or Scripture. The Karaites lived in parallel with the Rabbanite Jews, those who–like us–*did* follow Jewish law according to its rabbinic development. I don't think I'd be exaggerating to claim that their disagreements about Jewish law were on par with the ideological disagreements of our day.

One example: The Torah says explicitly that one should not kindle a flame on Shabbat. Rabbinic Jews understand that to mean that we must light 2 candles just

before sundown on Friday, not light anything during Shabbat, and conclude the day by lighting a Havdalah candle. Bonus: it's ok to leave the lights on, or on a timer, on Shabbat. To us, it makes perfect sense. Karaites forbid any flame, light, or heat to be flickering or in use on Shabbat–that means no candles burning on Friday evening, no lights left on or on a timer, and no warmed food. Quite a different Shabbat. Would have been hard to share a Shabbat dinner…

You can imagine how threatening Karaite beliefs were to the Rabbanite establishment–follow only what the Torah says, and don't recognize the authority of the rabbis! And vice versa–Karaites felt that rabbinic Judaism had so perverted biblical law that it was almost unrecognizable. The conflicts between the 2 communities were intense.

Enter the Rambam, Maimonides, the most prominent Jew in the 12th century. He started his medical and rabbinic careers in Spain and later moved to Egypt. This is crucial info because at that time, Rabbanite Jews regularly executed Karaites in Spain; whereas in Egypt, Karaites were a major force in politics, finances, and religion. When the Rambam moves to Egypt and is selected head of the community, he is asked how to relate to the Karaites in the community.

Spoiler alert: He does not recommend execution.

Instead, Maimonides[2] instructs his community to treat the Karaites of Egypt, Syria, and neighboring Muslim lands with fairness and respect. He urges humility and a commitment to peace in all dealings, as long as the Karaites act in good faith and refrain from speaking disparagingly about contemporary rabbis or those of previous generations.

Like Rabbi Meir and his teacher, Maimonides demands that his community place mutual respect above religious disagreements.

Some of the most beautiful historical documents from this time period that demonstrate this valued mutual respect are ketubot, marriage documents, testifying that Karaites and Rabbanites were intermarried! These documents articulate whose tradition the couple would follow on Shabbat, holidays, and for other occasions.

[2] Maimonides Responsa 449

In the ketubah[3] of David the Nasi, a Rabbanite, and his new wife, Nashiya, a Karaite, it says: "He further took upon himself not to force this Nashiya, his wife, to sit with him by the light of a Shabbat candle, nor to eat the fat tail, nor to desecrate her festivals, on condition that she observe with him his festivals." In other words: He can light Shabbat candles, and she doesn't need to see; they will observe his festivals together, but he will not desecrate hers.

Among 2 communities where there was always disagreement and often animosity and even violence, Maimonides found a way to foster respect, and plenty of people found ways to say "I do".

And the third story–not from ancient Judaism or from the Medieval period, but from our time. It's a story that Jon Polin[4], father of Hersh *zichrono livracha*, has told many times since October 7, 2023. About a year before his kidnapping, Hersh told his parents that he respects them very much, but he was not going to observe Shabbat as they do. Instead of removing himself from Jewish communal life, though, Hersh accompanied his father to their synagogue every Friday evening, every Shabbat morning, every holiday. He may not have opened a siddur or a machzor–he usually brought a book to read–but he made it clear: he didn't want his father to sit alone.

Presence itself is a strong statement of love and connection.

In each story–Rabbi Meir and Elisha ben Avuya, the Rabbanites and Karaites, and Hersh *z"l* and his father–people come first, relationships come first. Issues are secondary, and the bonds between people can withstand the strain of disagreement. There are no labels, no ad hominem attacks, and certainly no violence. At the Shalom Hartman rabbinic seminar a few weeks ago, Krista Tippet–creator and host of "On Being"–suggested that rather than focusing on the issue of disagreement, we should reorient ourselves to a discussion of our shared hopes and fears.

So where does that leave us? In the new year of 5786, on the eve of this most sacred day, how might we lessen the distance with those we love and with whom we disagree? While we face the added stress of social media, the core concept must be the same: people, relationships, come first. Each of us has someone who is distant

[3] Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate*, 336-337
[4] https://danielgordis.substack.com/p/jon-goldberg-polin-an-appeal-to-my

from us right now. It's our turn to find a way to return to each other; the time has come.

Let's imagine what that might look like.
We might reach out to a loved one, to a friend, and ask to share a cup of coffee, take a walk, or any other low-pressure interaction–maybe *not* Thanksgiving dinner or a family Bar Mitzvah party. We might talk about how much we value the relationship and how much we regret the distance that has come between us. We might suggest working together to set some guidelines for repairing the relationship. And those can be as benign as not touching the hot topic at all, to agreeing to seek common values, to agreeing to set labels aside and focus on our hopes and fears for Israel, for America, for humanity, for our earth. And then, the most critical part of all of this–we must, must, must listen. We must sit quietly and give this person whom we care about the chance to share their experience, to muster their own bravery and vulnerability.
We can't predict what they will say, and we may not even like it. The end result might be like Rabbi Meir and Elisha ben Avuya–the two men departing in different directions–or we might find ourselves able to lessen the distance–and how beautiful would that be.

Here are 5 practical suggestions:

1. Drop the labels; talk about hopes and fears. Work on finding common values, and acknowledge that different people express them in different ways.
2. Avoid the hard topic within the relationship, or decide, like the Rabbanites and Karaites, how to negotiate future conflicts.
3. See yourselves as standing on a wide bridge. Try to block out the shouting masses on either side, and just focus on meeting–just the 2 of you–in the middle. There's enough room.
4. Acknowledge together that sometimes your fellow, or your loved one, becomes your temporary foe–but it doesn't have to alienate you. It is important to leave room for turning back toward one another.
5. And finally, follow Hersh's example. Even if you can't speak to each other, make the choice to be present. To sit together. To acknowledge that you mean more to each other than the things you disagree on.

Friends, this day that we are entering is all about flexibility, repentance, and forgiveness, and the possibility of a better new year. We have released our old vows, making room for what's to come.

Our Kol Nidre prayer can only be recited *im ha'avaryanim*—in the company of sinners. Not saints, not the like-minded, but all of us.
Maybe the greatest sin we confess tonight is the fortress we build between ourselves and those we dismiss.
The Shema calls us to oneness: "Adonai Echad." God is One. Our community must strive, imperfectly, to echo that oneness.
So let us keep standing and sitting together—arguing, yes, but also listening, forgiving, and staying.
That, after all, is the true tradition.