

Yom Kippur 5787: How We Fight Rabbi Lisa Berney

Several weeks ago, I listened to a panel of synagogue past presidents discuss the challenges they faced during their years of leadership here in LA, as well as the greatest challenges they see facing the Jewish community today. As one might expect from a panel of past presidents, the conversation progressed from financial sustainability to succession plans...demographics to capital campaigns... continuity and more. And then something changed.

Mike, the patriarch of the panel, who had fielded questions all evening with an air of easy confidence, got quiet for a second. When he spoke again, his voice had dropped. “The real problem,” he said, “is that with everything going on in Israel, I don’t know who I am as a Jew anymore.”

No one gasped. Most people just kept eating. The conversation simply moved on, as conversations do. But one or two people nodded, almost imperceptibly, as if they’d been waiting for someone to say it out loud.

Another one or two frowned disapprovingly. For everyone else in the room, the line appeared to pass by unremarked, just one more thing a panelist said. But I don’t think it was just some ordinary thing a panelist said. Not in this year, at this moment, under these circumstances.

On October 7, 2023, the landscape of American Jewish life shifted, creating new conflicts and intensifying old ones. And we, as a Jewish community, still haven’t figured out how to really grapple with them together. That’s what I’d like to explore this morning – how *we*, as Jews, fight with one another.

But before we can understand why these conflicts have become so difficult, we need to be clear about what’s changed.

The world’s response to October 7th – a mixture of indifference, excuses, and even celebration – coupled with rising antisemitism in the years since, has shaken a foundational assumption many of us grew up with: that through generations of contribution and participation in American civic and cultural life, we Jews had achieved a secure and equal footing in this country.

I’m of a generation that believed American antisemitism was a relic of the past. The looming undercurrent felt by older Jews – that Jew hatred has always been there, just waiting to reemerge – felt overly alarmist. But now, many Jews find themselves asking if the safety we thought we’d built here is actually as durable as we believed.

At the same time, October 7th and everything since has shaken another foundational assumption of American Jewish life, namely that Jewish sovereignty, especially as we are seeing it manifested now, can guarantee safety.

For so many of us, Israel was supposed to be the place we could always return to, no matter what happened anywhere else. But for some, it’s become harder to say, without qualifying, that Israel remains that place.

The failure of the Israeli government to safeguard its citizens from October 7th, the wars that have followed, and its increasingly strained relationships with the international community, have cast doubts upon the lasting safety of our People's ancient home.

Meanwhile, watching settlers burn Palestinian homes and olive groves, Israeli ministers hurl racist taunts at their Palestinian neighbors, and the ongoing catastrophe in Gaza has forced many of us to reckon with the moral failings of the Jewish State.

The American Jewish community isn't facing one crisis. We're living inside two simultaneously – a rising threat to our safety here, and a rising uncertainty about what we're defending there. Rabbi Chasen opened our exploration of this two-faceted challenge on Rosh Hashanah eve.

And these two painful realities, taken together, have sent the American Jewish community scurrying in opposite directions, creating a gulf that we have yet to bridge.

For some, October 7th brought a sense of clarity. The horror of that day and its aftermath seared away any pretense that Jews or Israel would ever be fully accepted. Often called the October 8th Jews, they woke up the next morning with resurgent purpose and connection to their Zionism and their Judaism.

They include Jews like Jenna, a millennial mom who moved her kids out of public school and into Jewish day school because of the anti-Zionist and sometimes antisemitic rhetoric she heard from students and teachers. She's deepened not only her commitment to Israel, but to Jewish life as well: She now prioritizes weekly Shabbat dinners, regularly attends services, and even built her own sukkah for the first time. She has never felt more connected to her Judaism.

And she's not alone. There are countless American Jews just like Jenna, who couldn't feel less certain about the world, but couldn't feel more certain about their commitment to Israel and to the Jewish people.

But there is another October 8th Jew, one who was heartbroken by the events of October 7th, but also horrified by what's followed: the mounting death toll in Gaza, Jewish terrorism in the West Bank, and what has felt like to them a reckless quest from one war to the next.

This Jew reconsidered their relationship with Israel, if they even had one in the first place, grappling with the gap between the Jewish values they'd been taught and the lived behaviors of their own People. And as their October 8th counterparts, alongside the Jewish institutions to which they belonged, leaned harder into Zionism, *they* began to lose conviction that institutional Judaism held room for their doubts. Some even began to question their place within the Jewish community itself.

These Jews include people like Simon, who grew up at synagogue and went on a Birthright trip to Israel during his college years. He used to wear the *kippah* he brought home from Israel at Friday night dinners with friends from the trip. In Religious School, he learned that Judaism champions *tikun olam*, repair of the world, as well as a responsibility to protect the vulnerable. So when he hears Itamar Ben Gvir, Israel's far right national security minister, call for the displacement of Palestinians, he wants nothing to do with Israel – and frankly, nothing to do with a Jewish community he believes supports it, or, at least, won't oppose it.

Nor is Simon alone. There are countless American Jews just like Simon, who couldn't feel less certain about Israel, and have, therefore, begun to question their Judaism.

Two Jews. Two profoundly different responses to the same moment. But the question facing us is not: which one is right? It's whether we can build a community that holds them both. Because neither of them is going anywhere. And neither should have to.

This tension played out recently at the Re-Charging Reform Judaism Conference which gathered hundreds of Reform Jewish leaders. During the opening session, the Hebrew Union College was criticized for ordaining anti-Zionist clergy. This is the very seminary where I and the rest of our clergy team were ordained. The president of the college responded by explaining that liberal Jewish education is meaningless if students can be expelled simply for reaching a conclusion we might not like.

But their disagreement was never just about the College or even just about Israel. It's about what it means to be an American Jew today. They were arguing about who we are, what we believe, and, ultimately, who belongs. And so are we. So is all of Jewish America.

In her latest book, *The Art of Conflict*, author Priya Parker writes about what happens when a conflict touches on our sense of “us-ness.” Who are we, as a group? What makes us us? These questions are often precipitated by what she calls a “triggering event”, something that exposes the internal fissures of a community.

The conflict itself, Parker argues, isn't the problem.

What keeps us apart is either unhealthy conflict, which happens when we tear each other down, insult, sabotage, disrespect, humiliate, or dominate – or unhealthy peace, which happens when we practice avoidance, when no one says what they're actually thinking, when important conversations never happen, and when silence ends up protecting those with power and burdening those without.

“What's missing,” she concludes, “Is the skill of healthy conflict: the ability to hold heat with care between people long enough to be clarifying and generative.”¹

Often, we treat conflict as something to avoid at all costs. But avoiding it doesn't make it go away; it just festers, allowing the loudest voices to dominate and everyone else to feel dismissed and walk away.

But if we truly matter to one another as fellow Jews... if we want our American Jewish community to deepen and grow into its next iteration... then we must wade together into what Parker calls “the mess.” We must learn how to fight with each other.

Thankfully, we have a rich history of doing precisely that. The Mishnah extols the virtues of *machloket l'shem shamayim*, “a dispute for the sake of Heaven,” giving us the ancient schools of Hillel and Shammai as an illustration of how to fight with one another in a generative way.² Though the two schools disagreed on hundreds of questions of Jewish law, including matters of marriage, they did not allow those disagreements to prevent them from being in relationship,

¹ Priya Parker, *The Art of Fighting*, p. 4.

² Mishnah Avot 5:17.

even marrying into one another's families. As the Talmud puts it, they continued to maintain *chibah v'reiut* – affection and friendship – toward one another.³

They didn't achieve healthy conflict by resolving their disagreements. They achieved it by staying in caring relationship despite their disagreements.

When the Talmud ultimately declares about the competing opinions of Hillel and Shammai, *eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayyim* – “these and those are the words of the living God” – it isn't saying that each opinion is equally correct. Rather, it's saying that even an argument we disagree with can hold truth worth hearing.

How, then, do we face the challenging questions that threaten our sense of “us-ness?” How do we learn to fight with one another in a way that brings us closer instead of driving us apart?

I want to offer four steps to begin:

NUMBER 1: Choose the right fights.

A few months after October 7th, I sat in a room with a group of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders for an interfaith dialogue centered on Israel and Palestine. I still remember what it felt like in my body to be in that room... a pit in my stomach... my heart pounding so loudly I actually thought the person sitting next to me could hear it. I kept putting my hand on my heart, trying to calm it, trying to keep it open.

As accusations, charged language, and painful reflections filled the room, I left feeling... not more connected or more understanding, but more angry and lonely, having heard what felt like attacks on my People from others who didn't know me and whom I didn't know.

Because we needed to build a relationship before we turned up the heat. We'd never sat together. We hadn't broken bread together. And now, we were expected to jump straight into the fire together.

We cannot simply rush into difficult conversations because the subject matters to us. We must build trust. We must create sacred spaces that nurture real listening.

We were so eager to face our divisions that we failed to get to know one another first as people, more than representative symbols of our communities.

Which means, those online arguments on Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok? They're not convincing anyone about anything. The people who already agree write in with praise. The people who already disagree write in with attacks, and everybody else ends up angrier and less enlightened.

Online fights don't build relationships. They create echo chambers. So, the next time you read an inflammatory comment about Israel/Palestine, American politics, celebrities like Macklemore and Ed Sheeran, or whatever else has found its way onto your feed, and you feel yourself getting ready to respond...

Don't. Just don't do it. Close your screen and save yourself the time, energy, and angst. No real listening or exchange of ideas is going to happen on your Instagram feed. If you're upset

³ BT Yevamot 13B-14A.

with someone you care about, decide whether this is a conversation worth having – and if it is, have it with them as a human being, not as a comment thread. And if it's a stranger, let it go. Breathe, delete, and move on.

When the Mishnah first teaches us about *machloket l'shem shamayim*, “a dispute for the sake of Heaven,” it also teaches us to distinguish between a disagreement that makes us better, like those of Hillel and Shammai, and a disagreement that makes us worse.⁴

When we prepare to fight, we shouldn't simply ask, “Do I disagree?” We must ask, “What am I fighting for?” Am I fighting to be right? To win? Or am I fighting for something greater than myself and with someone who matters to me?

If it's not the latter, then, and only then, we ought to just walk away.

NUMBER 2: Complicate the story.

After I left that interfaith conversation pretty outraged, a friend and colleague said something to me that I didn't particularly want to hear. “Lisa,” she said, “that woman who said all those things that hurt you – she's also a young mom like you. She's scared for her kids.”

My friend complicated her story. And once her story became complicated, she was no longer just a caricature of her beliefs. She was a real person, a mom like me, speaking from her place of pain.

Parker argues that, in conflict, we must seek to complicate the individual rather than simplify them... to remind us that no one is a single story. Each of us contains multitudes, and even different, sometimes contradictory feelings within ourselves.⁵ Complicating the story makes room for nuance, for multiple identities, which is where understanding lives. And once we do that, we're ready for...

NUMBER 3. Listen for pain.

We love to be right. We yearn to be understood.

But in good, productive conflict... conflict that connects us instead of dividing us, we don't begin by trying to be right. We don't even begin with the intention of being understood. We begin by listening for pain.

And there is so much pain to hear. I have been hearing it over and over again... from people who are terrified for their families in Israel... from people who are mourning the Israel they once felt so connected to and are now ashamed of... from people who can't talk to their children, relatives, or friends about it without the conversation exploding... from people who fear for the future of the Jewish homeland... from people who fear rising antisemitism against American Jews... from people who feel that their Jewish community hasn't been speaking to them or creating a space for them... from people who simply don't know what to believe and feel caught in the middle.

Recently, I heard two parents sharing their grief that the Jewish community they grew up in no longer feels right for them. As the rhetoric from the *bima* denounces anyone who doesn't

⁴ Mishnah Avot 5:17.

⁵ Parker, p. 158-159.

support Israel unconditionally, they shared a real sense of loss that the community they love doesn't feel like theirs anymore.

Immediately thereafter, I listened as two other friends shared their fears about the political landscape in New York. When they see the New York City mayor calling for the arrest of Israel's prime minister or see politicians losing primaries for supporting Israel, *they* don't necessarily see a referendum on Israel's moral failures. They see the possibility that New York could become unsafe for Jews – and if New York can become unsafe for Jews, so can Los Angeles or any city where Jews live.

I may disagree with how they see things or how their fears influence their choices. But I can listen to their fears. I can hear the pain underneath their positions, and from that pain, understanding is born.

I wonder what might have happened if someone from that panel of Temple presidents had approached Mike afterward and asked him about his pain... or if one of the nodding heads decided to say what they were thinking – with sensitivity, yes, but to say it, instead of just nodding almost imperceptibly. How might our Jewish community begin to look a little different?

We spend so much of this day examining where we were wrong. But this year, perhaps more than ever, our *teshuvah* requires us to examine those times when we are **so certain that we are right** that there is no longer room for another human being.

We need to learn to listen for pain, not because pain makes someone right. Not because understanding another person's fear requires us to surrender our own convictions. But because when we hear the person beneath the position, disagreement becomes possible without dehumanization.

And finally...

NUMBER 4. Find the joy.

Healthy conflict requires deep relationships, and, though the sages teach that struggle will sharpen us, we also need spaces where we can laugh together, celebrate together, and simply enjoy being in community together. Judaism poses difficult questions to us, but it shouldn't always be hard.

To have healthy conflict, we need a healthy community, one that dresses in onesies for Pajamukah Chanukah, puts on costumes for Purim, dances together at a Friday night Shabbat. We need to laugh over board games, and bicker on the pickleball court, and shmooze over mahjong and oneg cookies. Eat together. Pray together. Celebrate together.

Hillel and Shammai didn't just share arguments. They shared families. They shared students. They belonged to the same People. And that relationship gave them a firm foundation to lean upon when they disagreed, sometimes bitterly.

And that is what these steps are ultimately about. When we learn to (1) to choose the right fights, (2) to complicate the story, (3) to listen for pain, and (4) to find the joy, we won't resolve all our conflicts. But we'll discover how to disagree in ways that strengthen, rather than fray, our relationships.

This matters enormously for the Jewish community. We are a small People. Yes, we need boundaries. After all, a People that stands for nothing ultimately means nothing. But when we treat every conflict as a betrayal, we're not protecting our people's integrity – we're just kicking more people out of an already small tent. And we don't have that luxury.

We must strengthen our muscle of engaging in difficult conversations with each other with curiosity, compassion, humility, and grace... listening intently for what's at stake for the person in front of us and what's being activated by their own experience.

And once we do, we'll discover that multiple things can be true. The fear that we are neglecting our connection to Israel, and therefore our commitment to Jewish peoplehood, is real. And the need to confront the moral failures of Israel rather than whitewash them is also real.

But I believe in our ability to hold all of it... uncomfortably... imperfectly... but to hold it, nonetheless. And to struggle together with it. Because the goal isn't uniformity. The goal is relationship. The goal is a People, committed to one another and to the sanctity of all human life, who choose to stand together, rather than fall apart.

This morning we read from the Torah *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem* – we stand ALL of us together on this day. The Torah acknowledges that “all” of us includes diversity of life station – from leaders to the rank and file... from the young to the old... from the wood chopper to the water drawer.

Might it also mean from the Zionist to the antizionist... from the Mikes to the Jennas to the Simons, as long as they all sincerely seek to sustain the future of the Jewish people and Jewish life?

To navigate the changed landscape facing American Jews today, we don't need to find consensus. We need to assure the person who woke up on October 8 more committed to Israel that there is a place for them. And we need to assure the person who woke up on October 8 questioning Israel that there is a place for them. And for all the Jews in between.

That is *machloket l'shem shamayim*. Not the absence of conflict. Not perfect harmony. But the willingness to hold heat with care, long enough for something new to emerge.

Here, at Leo Baeck Temple, we can be that community. A place where we choose the fights that matter, where we see the whole person, where we listen intently for one another's pain, and where we experience enough joy together to stay connected, even when the conversation gets hard. A place where our disagreements bring us closer to one another. A place where we can be different kinds of Jews – and still recognize one another as Jews.

Because being a Jew today doesn't require us to stop fighting. **It requires us to learn how to fight in a way that keeps us standing together.**

G'mar chatimah tovah.