

THESE AND THOSE ARE THE WORDS OF THE LIVING GOD

EMBRACING VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY

DISCUSSING THE VIDEO:

In her TED Talk, Kathryn Shulz describes the dangers of “error blindness” – our inability (or unwillingness) to see when we are wrong. She tells a story of a surgeon who operated on the wrong leg of a patient. When asked about it, the hospital’s Senior Vice President for Healthcare Quality for the hospital said, “For whatever reason, [the surgeon] simply felt that he was on the correct side of the patient.” (9:02). There is a danger, Shulz argues, in trusting too much in the feeling of being on the “right side.”

One problem with this tendency, she suggests, is that if we assume that our beliefs perfectly reflect reality, then we must grapple with the fact that other people disagree with us. In order to do so, we use what she calls a “series of unfortunate assumptions”: either they are misinformed; or they are idiots; or they are evil. These assumptions, she argues, lead us to “treat each another horribly.”

Finally, Shulz suggests that our ability to see things other than completely objectively is part of what it means to be human. Essential to human experience, Shulz argues, is the fact that we “expect this one thing to happen, and something else happens instead.” “For good and for ill, we generate these incredible stories about the world around us,” she says, “and then the world turns around and astonishes us. . . . If you really want to rediscover wonder, you need to step out of that tiny, terrified space of rightness, and look around at each other. And look out at the vastness and complexity, and mystery of the universe and be able to say, ‘Wow. I don’t know. Maybe I’m wrong.’”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Which of Shulz’s three assumptions – ignorance, idiocy, or evil – do you employ most often when thinking about people with whom you deeply disagree? That is, when it comes to things that matter to you, do you think people who disagree are uninformed? Unintelligent? Motivated by evil ends? If you were to drop these assumptions, what questions would you want to ask of those with whom you disagree?
- (b) What belief do you hold that you would most fear being wrong about?

FROM OUR TRADITION:

Jewish tradition has long grappled with the question whether truth can be reconciled with multiple viewpoints. Consider this description of the revelation at Mount Sinai, in *Shemot Rabbah*¹:

Text 1

Rabbi Yochanan said the voice of God [at Sinai] went forth and was split into 70 voices, 70 languages, so that all the nations would hear, and each nation would hear the voice in its own tongue...The voice of God spoke to each Israelites, that means to each and every person. God's voice was heard and understood because the voice spoke to each individual according to that person's particular ability to hear and understand...to the elderly in keeping with their ability, to the young in keeping with their ability, to the little ones in keeping with their ability, and so on.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What is the purpose of God's voice being split into 70 voices, according to this text?
- (b) This text suggests that beneath our surface disagreements, we all hold the same ultimate truth. What do you make of that argument? Is this only true of people who draw on a shared religious or cultural tradition?
- (c) This text suggests that the Israelites at Sinai all heard God differently, based on their ability to hear and understand. If everyone were equally "able" and spoke the same language, do you think they would nevertheless have heard God differently?

Hillel and Shammai were the heads of two competing schools of thought around the first century CE. They and their followers (referred to as "Beit Hillel" and "Beit Shammai") often disagreed vehemently and came to opposite conclusions about essential matters of Jewish law.

However, our tradition says the following about these rival factions:

Text 2

Although Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed, Beit Shammai did not, nevertheless 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 towards one another. . . For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. [One group] said: "The law is in accordance with our opinion," and the other said: "The law is in accordance with our opinion." Ultimately a Divine Voice emerged

¹ Shemot Rabbah 5:9.

and proclaimed: “Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the law is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.”

Since both these and those [opinions] are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the law established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the law they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai. ²

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What does it mean that both Hillel and Shammai’s arguments are “the words of the living God,” if Hillel prevailed?
- (b) What do these texts suggest about how we should interact with those with whom we disagree?
- (c) In our modern world, how would you distinguish between arguments that are “for the sake of heaven” and those that are not?

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (“Rav Kook”) draws on this idea of multiple truths when he explains why scholars in the Talmud are referred to as “builders”:

Text 3

For the building is constructed from various parts, and the truth of the light of the world will be built from various dimensions, from various approaches, for “these and those are the words of the living God” . . . It is precisely the multiplicity of opinions which derive from variegated souls and backgrounds which enriches wisdom and brings about its enlargement. In the end all matters will be properly understood and it will be recognized that it was impossible for the structure of peace to be built without those trends which appeared to be in conflict.³

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How does Rav Kook’s understanding of the reason for the existence of multiple viewpoints compare to the explanation in *Shemot Rabbah* (about the Israelites’ experience at Sinai). How does it compare to Kathryn Shulz’s understanding?

² Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eruvin 13b.

³ Abraham Isaac Kook (20th c. Israel), *Olat HaRayah*, p. 330, as translated in Reuven Kimelman, “Judaism and Pluralism,” in *Modern Judaism*, vol. 7, No. 2 (May, 1987).

- (b) When, in your experience, is it useful to have a variety of opinions expressed? What is one concrete step you could take to increase the number of opinions you hear on subjects that are important to you?

Consider this text by the Chassidic master Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav:

Text 4

Understand that a disagreement is a kind of creation of the world. For the creation of the world fundamentally required an empty space, since without it, everything would be the infinite presence of God and there wouldn't be any place for the creation of the world. Therefore God pulled the light back to the sides and the empty space was created and in it God created everything – days and measures – using speech, . . .

Similarly, this is also an aspect of disagreement. If the sages were united, there wouldn't be a place for the creation of the world. Only when there are disagreements between them, and they move away from each other, each one pulling back towards a different side, can some kind of empty space be created between them. This, then is like pulling back the light to the sides. This is where the creation can then happen through speech. All the words that each one of them says, all are only for the sake of creating the world, which is made by them in the empty space between them.

A similar idea is advanced by the modern Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai:

Text 5

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.⁴

⁴ "From the Place Where We are Right," *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, ed. and trans. Chana Block & Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (d) What does Rebbe Nachman mean when he says that “disagreement is a kind of creation of the world?” Why does he think disagreement is necessary or productive?
- (e) Both Rebbe Nachman and Yehuda Amichai seem to suggest that in order for creativity to bloom, we need to open up some space beyond our own opinions. What do you make of this? How would we go about creating more “room” for such creativity to happen? What keeps us from doing so? What is one concrete step you could take to open yourself up to the views of others?

MORAL FIELDWORK:

The next discussion in this series will focus on learning from those with whom we may disagree. The Viewpoint Diversity Experience (created in collaboration with Jonathan Haidt) has gathered materials that represent “liberal” and “conservative” viewpoints, so that you can explore the ideas of “the other side.” Before your next meeting, please visit the Viewpoint Diversity Experience website, and go to the section entitled “Venturing Beyond Your Moral Matrix.” (A link to this page is on the CORE Groups page of the Central Synagogue website). Once there, please choose a video or article from a perspective other than your own (i.e. liberals should choose something from the conservative list, and vice versa). Please make a note of your reaction to this piece, so that you can discuss it next time.