

SHEMA YISRAEL

THE COMMANDMENT TO LISTEN DEEPLY

DISCUSSING YOUR “DIVERSITY VIEWPOINT EXPERIENCES”:

At the end of your last session, you were each invited to spend some time on the Viewpoint Diversity Experience website, exploring the moral convictions of people on the “other side” of the political divide. Take a few moments to discuss what you learned, either about “them” or about yourself.

You may want to break up into groups of 2 or 3, so that each person has ample time to talk.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What resource did you read or watch? How did you choose it?
- (b) What was it like to hear that perspective? Did you find yourself arguing against it in your head? Do you feel you understand the “other side” any better? Did you find any points of connection? Did it make you angry? Sad? Afraid? Sympathetic?
- (c) What is something else you would like to understand about that perspective? How might you learn about it?

FROM OUR TRADITION:

It is instructive that one of the central moments in our prayer service is not the recitation of a creed, but a command to listen: “*Shema, Yisrael: Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.*” – “*Listen, Israel: Adonai our God is One.*” What it means that God is “one” is a difficult question, and one that has occupied theologians for hundreds of years. But in our service, we are not commanded to have the answer to this question. Instead, the command is simply to listen and consider this statement.

In *Pirkei Avot*¹, an ancient Jewish text that collects the advice of the sages, we read:

Text 1

Torah is obtained with 48 things, and these are them: study, attentive listening, preparation of speech, understanding of the heart, intellect of the heart, reverence, awe, humility, happiness, purity, service of sages, care of friends, debate of the students, clarification, scripture, mishnah, minimization of merchandise, minimization of

¹ Pirkei Avot 6:6 (2nd c. CE).

worldly occupation, minimization of pleasure, minimization of sleep, minimization of conversation, minimization of laughter, patience, generosity, trust of the sages, acceptance of afflictions, knowing one's place, gladness in one's portion, erection of a fence to one's words, lack of self-aggrandizement, being beloved, love of God, love of God's creatures, love of the righteous, love of the upright, love of rebuke, distancing from honor, lack of arrogance in learning, lack of joy in issuing legal decisions, lifting of a burden with one's friend, judging him with the benefit of the doubt, leading another to truth, leading another to peace, deliberation in study, questioning and responding, hearing and adding, learning in order to teach and learning in order to act, making one's master wiser, focusing one's teaching, saying [a thing] in the name of the one who said it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What is it about these 48 things that lead one to Torah (understood here as Divine Truth)?
- (b) What values does this text promote? Why are these qualities particularly important to the pursuit of Truth? Which of these qualities poses the greatest challenge for you?

Jewish legal tradition is quite serious about determining the “right” answer when it comes to Torah. But how are we to discern the truth if we are inundated with conflicting opinions? The Talmud instructs us as follows²:

Text 2

Lest a person say: “Now, how can I study Torah when it contains so many different opinions? The verse states that they are all “given from one shepherd.” One God created them, one leader gave them, the Master of all things uttered them . . . You, too, therefore, make your ears like a hopper and take in the words of those who forbid and the words of those who permit, the words of those who declare “ritually impure” and the words of those who render them “pure”; the statements of those who prohibit actions and the statements of those who permit them; the statements of those who deem items invalid and the statements of those who deem them valid.

² Chagiga 3b. Thanks to Rabbi Shuli Passow, who directed me to this passage.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What does it mean to “make your ears like a hopper”?
- (b) Does this text imply that all answers are equally true? Or simply that we need to listen to them? How do you imagine one is to decide whether something is “forbidden” or “permitted” in this scenario?
- (c) Does adopting this outlook require a belief in God?
- (d) How does this approach relate to the section of Pirkei Avot quoted above?

A MODERN VOICE:

The contemporary Jewish theologian Martin Buber suggested that the Divine could be experienced in moments of authentic human connection. Consider these two statements by Buber:

Texts 3 & 4

- (a) The chief presupposition for the rise of genuine dialogue is that each should regard his partner as the very one he is. I become aware of him, aware that he is different, essentially different from myself in the definite, unique way that is peculiar to him, and I accept whom I thus see, so that in full earnestness I can direct what I say to him as the person that he is. . . . I accept this person, the personal bearer of a conviction, in his definite being out of which his conviction has grown -- even though I must try to show, bit by bit, the wrongness of this very conviction.³
- (b) Even as a young man, I felt I have not the right to want to change another if I am not open to be changed by him as far as it is legitimate.⁴

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Why is it so essential for Buber that we become aware that the person with whom we are in dialogue is “essentially different from myself in the definite, unique way that is peculiar to him.” How do you imagine we would go about gaining that kind of knowledge?
- (b) What do you make of Buber’s claim that he must “try to show, bit by bit, the wrongness of [the other’s] conviction”? Is this at odds with his statement in the second text that he must be “open to be changed by him as far as it is legitimate?”

³ Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*.

⁴ Martin Buber, quoted in Kenneth N. Cissna & Rob Anderson, *Moments of Meeting: Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Dialogue* (SUNY University Press, 2002).

- (c) If we are not open to change, is there any point in entering into discussion with those with whom we disagree?
- (d) What is the line between accepting who someone is (and acknowledging their legitimate conviction) and choosing not to oppose them?

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.⁵

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

MORAL FIELDWORK:

In *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Ben Zoma is quoted as saying: “Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone, as it is said [in Psalms 119:99]: ‘From all who would teach me, I have gained understanding.’”⁶

Between now and your final meeting, you are invited to go and “learn from everyone” – or at least to learn from those with whom you disagree. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to: (a) attend an event, group, or program that is at odds with your general political beliefs; or (b) invite someone whose views differ substantially from yours to have a conversation in which they focus on listening. You will have a chance to “report back” at your next session.

⁵ 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).

⁶ *Pirkei Avot* 4:1.