MAKE YOURSELF LIKE A WILDERNESS

RABBI NICOLE ARMENTA AUERBACH, PARASHAT BEMIDBAR 5777

FACILITATOR’S GUIDE

BIG QUESTION: HOW DO WE PREPARE OURSELVES TO RECEIVE TORAH?

In this sermon, Rabbi Auerbach considers the Talmud’s statement that “If a person makes himself like a wilderness, he will be worthy of Torah,” and considers the two different explanations for this enigmatic statement. This discussion will allow participants to consider the circumstances under which they are most open to learning from others, and what it means to be tolerant of a diversity of truths.

DISTRIBUTING THE SERMON:

Links to a video recording of the sermon, as well as a copy of the written text, are available on the CORE Groups page of the Central Synagogue website. A few days before your meeting, you should contact your group members to let them know which sermon you will be discussing, so that they can watch and/or read it in preparation for the discussion. (It is helpful to include a link to the materials in your email). In order to keep the sermon fresh in everyone’s minds, you may wish to recommend that participants make a note of any questions or reactions they have immediately after watching it. Even if you saw the sermon in person, please at least review the written text before the meeting, so that you can participate fully in the discussion.

NAME TAGS:

For at least the first several sessions, please ask everyone in the group to wear a name tag (or, if seated around a table, to place a name card in front of them). Even if most people know one another, it is important that no one feel uncomfortable for not remembering everyone else’s name.

INTRODUCTION AND ICE-BREAKER:

Ask each person to introduce themselves, and to share with the group:

(a) their name; and
(b) something they were recently surprised to learn OR
(c) the place where they find it easiest to learn new things.
OPENING ACTIVITY

**Materials:** If showing the video, a screen large enough for everyone to watch the video. If using the handout, copies of the handout for everyone.

This activity will allow participants the opportunity to reflect on the emotional reactions they experience in response to learning different kinds of information.

It draws on a comic by Matthew Inman, the full text of which can be found here: http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe_clean. An abridged version of the comic is attached at the end of this guide, and can be used as a handout.

A video version is posted with the facilitator guide on our website and can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_aTN3yKOkY.

Two sets of instructions are included here, depending on whether you choose to use the handout or the video:

*If showing the video:*

- (1:10) Pause for volunteers to share their answers to the video’s question.
- (1:52) Pause for volunteers to reflect on the difference in answers/sensations.
  - Optional: At 2:40, pause and skip ahead to 3:38.
- Watch to the end of the film, then ask participants to form pairs or small groups to briefly discuss their reactions and thoughts. After a few minutes, reform the larger group and ask for final thoughts.
- Continue reflecting:
  - What was a time when you saw someone else encounter information that was counter to a deeply held belief? How did they react?
  - Can you think of a time when you learned something that challenged what you knew to be true?
    - What was your reaction? What did that feel like?
    - Reflect on the thing that you learned. In thinking about it, do you react the same way you did when you first learned it, or has your reaction changed?
If using the handout:

Have everyone find a partner with whom to go over the handout. Instruct the group to note and share their emotional reactions to the information in the handout. When everyone seems to have finished working through the handout, bring the group back together to reflect and think about the following questions:

(1) What was a time when you saw someone else encounter information that was counter to a deeply held belief? How did they react?
(2) Can you think of a time when you learned something that challenged what you knew to be true?
   a. What was your reaction?
   b. What did that feel like?
   c. Reflect on the thing that you learned. In thinking about it, do you react the same way you did when you first learned it, or has your reaction changed?
TEXT STUDY

Attached is a text-study sheet that you may use to facilitate a discussion of the themes and issues raised by the sermon. Please make sure to either make a copy for each member or ask everyone to bring it themselves, in paper or electronic form. If you choose the latter course, you may still wish to print a few extra copies for those who may forget to bring theirs.

Here are some things to consider:

(a) It is customary to recite a blessing before studying Torah.

(b) Our tradition teaches us that Torah study can be a source of healing and blessing. You may want to ask members of the group if they would like to dedicate their study to anyone in particular. This is a nice way to help the group get to know one another, and to learn about significant events in each other’s lives.

(c) Depending on the preferences of your group, you may choose to distribute this sheet the week before the meeting, so that participants will be familiar with the texts, and can begin to think about their own responses.

(d) You can choose to either work through the texts as one group, or to break up into pairs (“hevruta”) for an initial period of discussion, and then allow the pairs to share something they learned with the group.

(e) The ultimate goal of these groups is not for participants to master a particular number of Jewish texts, but to connect with one another. If group members are sharing their own stories and experiences in a way that seems fruitful, there is no need to cut off that conversation in order to make sure you “finish” the text sheet. If you are unsure, you can always poll the group to decide whether it is time to move on.

CONCLUSION

We recommend that you wind down the text study about 15 minutes before the end of the session, to allow for a meaningful conclusion. This conclusion may take any shape you wish. Some possibilities are:

(a) Ask each person to name one insight they have gained, or one question that they are taking with them.
(b) Ask each person to offer a blessing to the group, drawn from your learning together.
(c) Ask each person to say one word to represent how they are feeling coming out of your discussion.

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He lost most of his teeth in his twenties and had a set of dentures made out of wood.

It’s a disturbing visual the founding father, commander-in-chief, and first President of the United States click-clacking his way through a ham sandwich.

WOOD YOU LIKE A BITE?

You may have heard that George Washington had wooden teeth.

I put the fir in First Amendment.

Except it isn’t true.
In 2005, at the National Museum of Dentistry in Baltimore, laser scans were performed on Washington’s two-hundred-year-old dentures, and found them to be made of gold, lead, hippopotamus ivory, horse, and donkey teeth.

His mouth was a petting zoo of nightmares.

Upon learning this information, I want to ask you something:

how did it feel to learn this new fact about George Washington’s teeth?

I stated a thing.
I provided evidence of that thing, and presumably you now believe in the thing I stated.

Presumably, your belief in the composition of George Washington’s teeth has changed with little or no friction.

Presumably, the next time you’re at a party and George Washington’s teeth come up in conversation, you’re going to proudly impart this newfound knowledge to your fellow partygoers.

Yes

Terrific, let’s continue.
What if I told you George Washington had another set of false teeth?

What if I told you this other set wasn’t made from wood, ivory, or any of the aforementioned materials?

What if I told you it was made from the teeth of slaves?
Why
do we easily soften to some ideas,
but not to others?

Why
do we gnash our teeth when presented
with evidence counter to our beliefs?

Why
don’t we only ignore this evidence,
but dig our heels in deeper and believe
more strongly in the opposing argument?

Why
would providing MORE evidence make
someone LESS likely to believe in an idea?

It seems backwards and
ballistic-crazy-bonkers to me.

It turns out ballistic-crazy-bonkers
has a name in the world of neuroscience.

It’s called the
backfire effect.
and it’s a well-documented
psychological behavior.

A few years ago
at the University of Southern California’s
Brain and Creativity Institute,
a study was conducted where participants
were placed into an MRI machine.

Once inside, they were presented with
counterarguments to strongly held
political beliefs.

A few examples:
“Laws restricting gun ownership should be
made more restrictive.”

“A gay marriage should not be legalized.”

As participants were read these
counterarguments, various parts of their
brains were scanned for activity.

What the study revealed was that the part
of the brain that responds to a
PHYSICAL threat also responds to an
INTELLECTUAL one.

This area of the brain is known as the
amygdala,
and it’s the emotional core of your mind.

Unfortunately,
it makes us biologically wired to react to
threatening information the same way we’d
react to being attacked by a predator.

From an evolutionary standpoint,
it makes sense.

If you were a caveman and another
caveman threw a boulder at your head,
you wouldn’t react by logically debating the
pros and cons of getting brained.
I sometimes pretend the amygdala of my brain is in my pinky toe.

When a core belief is challenged, I imagine it yelling insane things at me.

I let it yell.

Each mathematician in the world just confirmed that it’s four.

That is just a conspiracy of falsehoods.

I let it have its moment.

Now can the sum of two integers be Mexican food?

Don’t disrespect my beliefs.

I let the emotional cortex fight its little fight.

And then I listen.

And then I change.