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Any rabbi watching the news for the last few weeks might be especially nervous about giving the sermon this Yom Kippur. Will a congregant shout him down in a moment of tempestuous disagreement, a la Congressman Joe Wilson? Will a fellow service-leader steal the mic from him to tell the congregation that, although he's doing an OK job, other rabbis are giving *much* better sermons, a la Kanye West?

Indeed, it seems that our national mood is angry and argumentative. *The Atlantic Monthly* reports this month that disinterested journalism is being replaced with partisan "hit-jobbery."

> Consumers of such "news" become all the more entrenched in their prejudices, and ever more hostile to those who disagree. The other side is no longer the honorable opposition, maybe partly right; but rather always wrong, stupid, criminal, even downright evil.[1]

The health care debate has been hijacked by demagogues with the insensitivity and gall to compare Obama's attempt at health insurance reform to Hitler and Nazi Germany. This lunacy led one journalist to ask,

> ...Obama is trying to mobilize a majority on the basis of reasonableness, cool pragmatism, and the power of facts. Is that [a] fantasy?[2]

With the way things are going today, it does seem like a fantasy. But there is another way to function in political life. Pioneered by Saul Alinsky, who happened to be Jewish, in Chicago in the 1930s, this way has been adapted and transformed into practices that we call community organizing. It was made famous during the 2008 presidential campaign as part of Senator Obama's background in Chicago public life.

Organizing teaches that, rather than ideology or partisanship, our foundation for action should be listening and relationship. If we can get past the soundbites and demagoguery, and really get to know each other and what keeps us up at night,

then we have a chance at addressing our mutual challenges and problems together. In its early days, organizing took root among working class churches. Over the last decade, it has begun to find a place in Jewish communities, and more synagogues nationwide are joining local interfaith groups to agitate for social change.

The synagogue where I intern during the year in Mahwah, in northern New Jersey, engages in this work. Two years ago, they launched a listening campaign: a core group of a dozen congregants received training and held one-on-one conversations with over 100 other congregants. In these conversations, they got to know their fellow temple members a little better. They talked about what issues hit them close to home, what made them feel connected to synagogue life, and what might make them get more involved. One member of the core group said he was amazed at how much he learned about friends he thought he knew well, just by asking a few questions that went deeper than the usual small talk. They heard stories of individuals dealing with unemployment and families struggling with health insurance costs and availability. But the story they could act on -- the one they heard more than any other -- involved a deep concern for the local environment. There were fears about pesticides, contaminated water supply, and more toxic waste sites per area than any other state. Parents worried that their children were exposed to toxins just by playing in the yard or drinking the water, and they wanted to do something about it instead of feeling helpless.

Part of listening and valuing relationships means going beyond one's own synagogue community. They learned, with the help of a local community organizer, that the neighboring town of Ringwood, NJ had been dealing with the aftereffects of toxic waste dumped 40 years ago in abandoned mine shafts by the Ford Motor Co. One of the residents spoke at the synagogue, sharing the story of his family and community's lifelong health problems and learning disabilities. The assembly stood in support and vowed to work together with their Ringwood neighbors to clean up the waste. Since Ringwood is just "up the mountain" from the synagogue, our congregants began to wonder whether the contamination might have leaked into the groundwater and local reservoir, which would affect their families, too.

So we began, in partnership with the Ringwood community, an effort to address the problem. Our first action involved testifying at a local Environmental Protection Agency hearing. The EPA had been demanding test after test of the

contaminated sites without ordering much in the way of clean-up. Ford was only too happy about maintaining this status quo of a maze of red tape. The EPA showed their *own* chart of the steps along the path from contamination to clean-up; it was a multicolored, tortuous process. The rabbi's six-year-old son took one glance at the chart and said, "That looks like Chutes & Ladders!" How wise he was -- it was like a game of keeping citizens one step behind.

Our congregants took a step toward making a difference in that never-ending process. We lined up to speak during the hearing, each of us declaring our solidarity with our neighbors in Ringwood, and our disappointment with the EPA and Ford's unwillingness to demand or take responsibility for the mess.

This action was powerful for three reasons. For one, it changed the tone of the issue when a group of Jews from the next town over showed common cause with the residents of Ringwood. We were stronger for our numbers and our diversity. Second, it energized our congregants into further action toward systemic change. They saw what their organized effort could do, and they were hungry for more. Third, it led us to realize that when we need help addressing an issue in our community, our Ringwood neighbors will be there in solidarity with us.

Our approach continues today. In addition to developing our relationship with the Ringwood community, we have started building relationships with Ford representatives and our congressman. One of the Ringwood leaders told us that, since our congregants' testimony at the hearing, their dynamic with the EPA and Ford had changed for the better. They started to get more traction and respect. The government and corporate bureaucrats knew they had friends, and together we were stronger than any of us could be alone.

This story offers an alternative to the politics of hate that seem to have infected our public life. Fundamentalism and fanaticism creep into both ends of the political spectrum, and those who try to remain reasonable pragmatists seem like a beleaguered minority.

Jewish tradition, on Yom Kippur, invites us to subscribe to a different kind of fundamentalism. This fundamentalism honors people before principles, identities before ideologies. To show you what I mean will require some congregational participation. I would like to ask you all to open up your *Gates of Repentance* to

part of tomorrow's Torah portion, Nitzavim. It's on page 343, Deuteronomy 30:11-14, beginning at the bottom of the page. I invite you to read this passage responsively with me, your part being everything in quotes. I will read the part of Moses, addressing the Children of Israel on the threshold of the Promised Land.

> 30: 11] For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, nor too remote. 12] It is not in heaven, that you should say, *"Who will go up for us to heaven and bring it down to us, that we may do it?"* 13] Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, *"Who will cross the sea for us and get it for us and bring it over to us, that we may do it?"* 14] No, it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it.

(Thank you. You may put your prayerbooks away.)

Here is an expression of a Jewish bottom line, the fundamentals of our faith. Judaism resides in the mouth-heart partnership. This duality is a radical statement of our relationship to community and ourselves, and it is thousands of years older than Alinsky's or Obama's brand of community organizing.

The mouth is the locus of public discourse. It is a tool for interpersonal communication, and, so it is the fundamental building block of relationship and community. By locating the Torah in our mouths, Moses reminds us that Judaism cannot exist in isolation but requires the active engagement of a collective.

On the other hand, the heart is the locus of personal reflection, self-fulfillment, and autonomy. Individuality, even when it leads to disagreement, is essential for an authentic, thriving Jewish community. The individual's needs are heard and addressed by the community more effectively than if the individual were to act alone.

This interplay of individual and community is also illustrated in the way Moses addresses the Israelites in this speech. He locates the fundamentals of Judaism in "*your* heart" and "*your* mouth", both in the singular. That singular, together with the plural "You" in the very first verses of the portion, makes it clear that Moses is speaking to the community in its radical entirety: the Torah is to be found in the mouth and heart of every man, woman, and child – not just the Israelite, but the stranger, too. And not just those present at the time, but all their descendants in

perpetuity. Therefore, to exclude even one individual is to limit ourselves from the fullness of community. Our ability to make positive change in the world depends on the depth of our relationships, our willingness to look across lines that usually divide us and find mutual needs and common cause.

* * *

Any good teacher will tell you he learns more from his students than he imparts to them, and it was from a congregant that I learned the lesson of Torah I'm teaching tonight. During a meeting at my synagogue of the leaders of our community organizing efforts, we paired up to have what we call a "relational moment" -- two people asking each other what brought each of them to the table and what keeps them up at night. My partner, a congregant in his 50s, said, "My wife and I don't have any children. No one is going to remember us when we're gone. This synagogue community is where we matter. It's where we make a difference and have some impact on the world."

Four years of rabbinic education and I was still bowled over by his existential honesty. Here was a perfect illustration of the mouth-heart partnership that Moses spoke of in Nitzavim. This congregant was reaching out to say, "I am not complete if I am not in relationship. Only together can we help each other make a difference in the world."

While attending a community organizing training seminar in Chicago, I mentioned to one of the organizers that it might be a challenge to bring the tools of organizing into affluent suburban Jewish communities. As I began to ask for his advice, he interrupted me and said, "The first thing you should do is stop assuming that all Jews are affluent." And then he told me the following story:

> A synagogue vice president in Orange County, CA -- one of the wealthiest areas in the country -- lost her job. She was so embarrassed and ashamed of what people would think that, instead of telling anyone in her congregation what she was going through, she made fake business cards that said "consultant."

What is a sacred congregation, the organizer asked me, if not a place where someone in pain or in need can share that with her community and be embraced and supported?

That organizer's question is my challenge to all of you. Our political climate is being poisoned by blind partisanship and dogmatism. Our neighbors are struggling under the burdens of a weak economy and expensive health care. Will you be part of the solution? In your political, professional, and personal life, will you do as much listening as talking? Will you be honest with yourself about your own needs and fears, while honoring the concerns of others?

If our lives, individually and communally, are to be a force for good, then we must heed Moses' call to join our mouths and hearts together in relationship. Where we find common cause, we will act. Where we disagree, we will at least listen to the human being whose opinions differ from our own. Listening and relationship can be the antidote to poisonous politics.

Though we are confronted with dark and challenging realities, the "'door of hope' is still open." Thus wrote Michael Walzer, of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, in his book *Exodus and Revolution.* We come to a close with his book's concluding vision:

> We still believe ... what the Exodus first taught ... about the meaning and possibility of politics...:
> - first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;
> - second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;
> - and third, that "the way to the land is through the wilderness." There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.[3]

May this Yom Kippur bring you closer to your own heart and to your community. *G'mar chatimah tovah,* may we all be sealed in the Book of Life, marching together into a new year of hope and blessing.

To this we say, *amen*.

NOTES

[1] Mark Bowden, "The Story Behind the Story," *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2009), p. 54.

[2] Philip Weiss, "Who is Barack Obama...and why do people say such loopy, ugly things about him? The enduring rot in American politics," *New York Magazine* (September 28, 2009), p. 95.

[3] Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (Basic Books, 1985), p. 149. The internal quote is from W. D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 60.