

One of my all time favorite Jewish stories is about a revered Lithuanian rabbi, named Chaim Solevetchik of Brisk, also known as Reb Chaim Brisker. There are many stories about this rabbi, but the one I most appreciate describes how a congregant once came to him on Yom Kippur morning on the way to synagogue services, complaining of feeling very ill. Reb Chaim without a moment's hesitation ordered this congregant to head straight back home and make sure to have plenty to eat and drink, and not to worry about breaking the fast that the rest of the community would be observing that day. Sometime later word got out about Reb Chaim's decision to require this person to transgress the holy fast of Yom Kippur and one of his colleagues approached him and rebuked him for being so lenient about the fast. Reb Chaim's response to this was to correct his colleague's misimpression, by saying that he wasn't in fact lenient about the commandment to fast on Yom Kippur; he was simply very strict about observing the commandment to safeguard a person's health.

I'll admit that there is a rebellious part of me that enjoys this story just because of the challenge it contains to a generally sacrosanct Jewish practice. But let me be clear that I'm not telling the story this morning in order to encourage everyone to head straight out of here and to find the nearest Starbucks. Rather, I wanted to share this story because of the way that it demonstrates the moral complexity of our tradition, and the fact that two knowledgeable Jews can observe the same situation in which conflicting principles are operative and come to very different conclusions about what they each believe is right, and what they each believe Jewish tradition would have us do in response.

Even though this story is generally told in praise of Reb Chaim, I think it's important to note that the story ends without informing us of how the rebuking colleague responds to Reb Chaim's justification of his "pro-life" position. Presumably, this colleague is not about to change his own mind about his sense of how to balance the value of safeguarding health versus observing the Yom Kippur fast. But what I would very much like to know is whether the colleague walked away from the interaction respecting Reb Chaim's position as an authentic religious orientation, or, if he instead departed the conversation convinced that Reb Chaim was a dangerous and foolish leader, whose regrettable example would clearly lead to the demise of the Jewish people.

This question of how we deal with people who hold views differing from our own is directly related to the concerns I spoke about last week on Rosh Hashannah regarding the extreme negativity in this year's political campaigns and the deep polarization that has emerged between the major political parties in our country over the past two decades. And it is no secret that this electoral polarization is not in any way restricted to the nation's capital or even to the realm of political discourse. Many observers have written about how the political divide is symbolic of the larger schism within American society in general; between sub-cultures that seem less and less able to communicate with one another let alone find any common ground around which to join forces and work together.

On Rosh Hashanah I suggested that Jewish tradition potentially offered an alternative model of how to engage in passionate debate without losing our sense of respect for, and our sense of connection to, the people on the opposing side. However, I recognized that I had uncovered very little in the way of analysis or explanation for why our society seemed to be moving further from civil engagement and what might be done to stem the tide.

In the intervening days, as I continued to have discussions about this both inside and outside of Kol HaLev, I had the good fortune of learning about the existence of a movement within the discipline of Moral Psychology that has come up with a fascinating and challenging hypothesis that may shed some light on why not only our nation, but our world seems to have become such a place of cultural and religious conflict.

This school of thought, called Moral Foundations Theory, locates the root of our problem in the way we tend to form moral judgments about attitudes and behaviors that are outside of our personal sensibilities and expectations. There are three key arguments that these theorists make which form the basis of their perspective.

The first of these three key insights involves recognizing the role that rationality or reason seems to play in the process of forming our moral judgments, as well as the role it actually plays. For many years, the study of moral psychology and moral development has been based on the assumption that the process of arriving at a moral position is, in the main, based on our rational faculties.

The most prominent theorists of moral development, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, were certain that morality was closely tied to the development of our cognitive capacities, most specifically our capacity for logic and abstract thought. From that perspective therefore, as children grow into adolescents and then into adulthood, their potential for higher levels of moral reasoning increases along with their powers of cognition.

The school of Moral Foundations Theory argues, in contrast to Piaget and Kohlberg, that the most basic moral sensibilities in human beings are intuitive and pre-rational, regardless of our level of cognitive development, and that in the vast majority of situations, we first arrive at a moral position, and only afterwards, use our rational faculties to justify the position that we've already made an intuitive commitment to.

So, if this insight is accurate, then chances are that our own perspectives on such questions as the relative importance of protecting the environment, the appropriateness of government involvement in structuring our healthcare delivery system, and yes, who we think should be the next president of the United States, are not ones that we reasoned our way into. Rather, they are positions that we intuitively gravitated towards and can now probably justify with many kinds of rational arguments, but it is likely not our logic that got us there in the first place.

The second insight has to do with our assumptions about the scope of the legitimate moral universe. Moral Foundations Theory does not argue for moral relativism, but it does contend, as its name suggests, that there exists a range of moral matrices or foundations in human life, and that these moral foundations grow directly out of the core evolutionary challenges that we, as a species, have faced over the past two hundred thousand years. Different cultures tend to select or embrace unique combinations from this moral palette and this results in the development of diverse moral languages and sets of concerns that don't always translate so easily between one culture and another, or between one community and another.

Some combinations tend to prioritize the value and dignity of the individual, while others place more emphasis on the value and well being of the community. Some combinations include dimensions of sanctity or divinity in their moral frameworks, while others explicitly exclude these dimensions.

To take an easy example of this last category from our own tradition, there are some Jewish people on the traditional end of the religious spectrum who would very comfortably argue that it is categorically wrong for a Jewish person to consume meat and dairy foods together at the same meal, unless of course there are mitigating circumstances in which not doing so would somehow put that individual's life at risk.

On the other hand, there are few if any members of Kol HaLev that would be comfortable with that assertion. Our tendency would be to argue that the decision about whether to observe the laws of Kashrut in one's own life should be up to that individual and not placed in the category of being a moral imperative. By extension, much of what we would relegate to the realm of personal preference when it comes to religious rituals or customary practices would be seen by more traditionally minded people as including the moral dimension of Divine sanction.

Moral Foundations Theory sees this tension as one among many that represent the genuine and enduring moral diversity of the human race; a diversity that we will have to learn how to manage and leverage as we co-create our future together.

The third and final key insight of Moral Foundations Theory is related to and builds upon the first two. It asserts that moral frameworks have the dual capacity to bind like minded groups of people together in a powerful way, and simultaneously to blind those same people to the possibility of other equally legitimate moral perspectives. We get tremendous positive reinforcement from a sense of belonging to a group that shares an outlook on the world, especially when there are other groups we can point to that represent a competing and, we often think, inferior point of view. Our minds naturally tend to resist the possibility that there is more than one truly authentic moral framework out there, and we want to believe that this framework is the one with which we most identify. Seeing the reality of multiple moral viewpoints is similar to the challenge of viewing one of those well known optical illusions, such as the one that depicts both an older woman and a younger one, where we know clearly that a single illustration contains more than one image, but it's nearly impossible to perceive both images at the same time.

Taken together, all of these insights raise some challenging, but also some important questions for us to consider as we reflect on the sources and impact of the moral sensibilities in our own lives. I imagine that most of us have had the experience of encountering an opinion either in conversation with someone, or in the media, to which we reacted with the thought, how could any reasonable human being actually believe something like that? Certainly that message is among the most commonly utilized in many of the political campaigns. But if we were to adopt the perspective of Moral Foundations Theory, that attitude would be on display much more rarely than is the case in our society today.

It is not that we would all agree on every issue or policy, but we would recognize that people with perspectives different from our own can be just as smart, just as well informed and just as passionate about our world being a place of goodness and truth. We would see that they are simply coming to the conversation with a different mix of moral intuitions.

On this day of Yom Kippur, as we are paying perhaps more attention than we typically do to how we measure up against our own moral yardsticks, let us also be cognizant of the subtle ways in which the possession of and attachment to a moral yardstick can, in and of itself, lead us down a path towards an unhealthy self-righteousness; a path that can ultimately and ironically compromise our own moral potential.

May we aspire to a depth of insight that discerns the authentic humanity of viewpoints that differ from our own. And we may even hold out some hope, that if enough people choose to aim their hearts and minds in this direction, that there will be less gratuitous disparagement, and a greater likelihood of finding some common ground and some shared commitments across our disparate moral landscapes, even as the sacred argument about that which is not shared, will certainly continue. Ken yehi ratzon. May it be so.

Good Yuntif and May we all be sealed for a good and a morally insightful year!