Reflections on the Election: The Lessons from Hillel, Shammai, Avraham and a New Siddur Offer Us in a Time of Change
Rabbi Michael S. Siegel | 11/12/2016 | Parashat Lech-Lecha

How does one communicate with someone whose opinions you neither agree with nor value?

How does one find common footing when there appears to be an insurmountable divide between you?

These are not questions that were invented this week though they are acutely relevant. Thousands of years ago the Rabbis posed similar questions regarding the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. The work of these two great houses of learning formed the basis of Jewish law as we understand it today and set the example for how people with opposing viewpoints could successfully engage with one another to create a just legal system for our people.

In the Tosefta, a Rabbinic work that goes back to the third century of the Common Era, it is written:

One may say to oneself: Since the House of Shammai declares the same thing to be impure that the House of Hillel declares to be pure. If this is the case and legitimate opinions can be opposite of another then what is the sense of studying Torah. In other words, why should I bother to sit with someone whose view is opposite of my own? How can the Torah contain such diverse opinions? Perhaps the whole institution is irrelevant?

The answer the Rabbis give is instructive:

Quoting from the opening words of Deuteronomy the text continues: Eleh Hadevarim. These are the words. The words of this book were given by a single Shepard, one God who created them, one Provider gave them. Kol Maasim Baruch Hu, The Blessed ruler of all creation spoke them. In other words, the Torah that the Houses of Hillel and Shammai studied were given by God, and like that God, it could contain multiple legitimate meanings. Therefore, the text from the Tosefta continues, Make your heart into a room of many rooms and bring both the words of the House of Shammai and the words of the House of Hillel, both the words of those who forbid and the words of those who permit. In summary, allow your study of the text to be more like God and grow a heart that can contain more than one truth, more than one approach. (Tosefta Sotah 7:12)

Understand the approach of those you are struggling with even if it is opposite of your own, so that together you will be able to find your way.

What is an example of a Lev Hadrei Hadarim, of a heart of many rooms? This Siddur that I hold in my hand that we dedicate this day, is a marvelous example of a place
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where multiple opinions, sometimes quite opposite, can live on the same page. Look on page 185 and see that there is room for multiple opinions - those who include the names of the Matriarchs, the *Imahot*, in the recitation of our most sacred prayer, the Amidah, and those who choose the more traditional approach and include only the *Avot* - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Or consider pages 188a and 188b. On page 188a we have the traditional listing of the sacrificial animals offered in the Temple during the Musaf Service. Note the words, *for an alternate version of the b’rakha not centered on sacrifices continue on the next page*. On page 188b there is prayer that speaks not of burnt offerings but of a vision of universal redemption where *we walk together by the light of Your countenance*. Here are two very different opinions - the equivalent of the students of the House of Shamai declaring something impure and the House of Hillel declaring the very same thing pure, yet being able to be in respectful discussion with one another. This is what it means to have a heart of many rooms and to be able to make room for one another. Our Siddur, our prayer book, sets the model of dynamic pluralism encouraging us to take what we experience in prayer and make it part of our daily lives. I again want to thank Stephen and Terri Geifman for their generosity, making it possible for us to have Siddur Lev Shalem.

Now, what does a place with a heart of only one room look like? I visited such a place last week when I traveled to Montgomery, Alabama. I traveled with other members of our community and those of Chicago Sinai Congregation to assist in the work of the NAACP and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Together, we worked to ensure the protection of voters to exercise their constitutional right to participate in the election. Walking the streets of Montgomery you must quickly acclimate yourself to the fact that you are visiting the capital of the Confederacy. The flag of the state is a modified version of the flag of the Confederacy. There, is the building marked as the place where Jefferson Davis gave the order to fire on Fort Sumter thus beginning the Civil War. There, stands the White House of the Confederacy. There, is the square once used as a slave market. In that square stands a bus stop, the very same one from which Rosa Parks began that fateful ride where her refusal to get out of her seat for a white man launched the Civil Rights Revolution.

Working the voting lines on Election Day it became crystal clear that the struggle continues. Here the heart containing only one room continues to beat creating two very separate realities, one White and one Black.

On Tuesday night of this past week we witnessed that such divisions do not exist in places like Montgomery alone, but are very real across the United States of America. The choices that Americans had before them were stark. The divide was great. The flaws of the candidates were fully evident. What this election showed is how many feel disenfranchised, how many feel unheard by the government, how much anger exists,
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and how many are willing to put their trust in a person who has not served one day in office over a person who has spent the better part of her adult life working in public service. On Tuesday, many Americans entered voting booths with a heart of one room - less concerned with American foreign policy than with the family budget, less concerned about universality of health care than their own rising premiums, and more concerned about returning to an America that they recognized from one that appears so very different, so very unfamiliar, so very threatening.

Let us take note of how far we are from the ideal presented in the Tosefta regarding the Lev Hadrei Hadarim, the heart of many rooms - how deep the chasm that exists between whole numbers of Americans between the ideal and the real. We share one Constitution, one Declaration of Independence, but read them so very differently. Ask people around this country, around the corner, to interpret the words, All men are created equal and you are likely to receive very different responses. As the marches taking place across this country in response to the election of Donald J. Trump make unmistakably clear, we are a deeply divided country. We are also a country where anger is being expressed inappropriately on all sides and dangerously. During the course of this tumultuous election season expressions of anger and frustration gave way to the worst forms of hatred, of bigotry, of fear, of anti-Semitism, of racism, of Islamophobia, of misogyny. In the days since the election these voices are growing louder and bolder across the country.

At such a moment the example of Abraham in our parasha this week is instructive. We meet him as Avram is instructed to walk forward. Whatever promises and blessings are offered him are in the future. For now, Avram has to take action. He needs to leave the comforts of the known and walk into the unknown. He needs to work to transform the vision into a reality. Veheyeh Bracha: be a blessing: (Genesis 12:2)

Hevre, we are in uncharted waters right now. What we know is that the voters in this country have made their wishes known. Those who voted in numbers made their voices heard, and those who chose to stay home on Election Day also made their own contribution to the results. The United States of America remains a participatory democracy that only responds to people getting involved. What this election shows is how much our participation matters. Whether you are happy with the results of the election or devastated by them, the real work begins now. It is our collective responsibility to pay attention to political contests and begin to prepare for the next congressional races, to educate ourselves in regard to legislation, to knock on doors, and to help create the America that we want for ourselves, for those around us, and those who will follow after us.

One thing that we all must agree on is that words and expressions of hate have no place in the America of 2016. This is not Montgomery of 1860. We must make it known to
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President-elect Trump that he has a special responsibility to speak out now, quickly and decisively, and make it clear that expressions of hate to anyone, threats of violence against anyone, Jew, Muslim, Black, women, Hispanic, Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transsexual, or Queer have no place in this country. We of the Anshe Emet Community will stand with all peoples who are being threatened as we would expect them to stand with us. We will take President-elect Trump at his word when he said in his acceptance speech that: it is time to come together as one united people and pledged to be President for all Americans. The first step in the fulfillment of that pledge is to make America safe for all of its citizens and that begins with taking responsibility for his own inflammatory rhetoric.

However, there is another aspect of Abraham that should be noted. Abraham was also willing to go to war when necessary, to risk it all and fight for others. When his nephew Lot was taken captive, when he had his rights stripped from him, Abraham gathered a fighting force and freed him. This election and the make-up of our government will likely threaten the hard fought freedoms that so many enjoy in this country. A woman’s right to choose, marriage equality, voter rights, civil rights, and so the list goes.

We must be willing to fight to go forward and not backward, to march, to protest, and to do what it takes to insure that basic freedoms are protected for all Americans. If the health laws in this country are going to change, then we have to be willing to fight for the right of all Americans to have health care. We who live in a city that is known for its gun violence have a special responsibility to fight for a thoughtful interpretation of the 2nd amendment and our right to bear arms. Along with that, we must be willing to fight for greater economic and educational opportunities for all peoples, especially in our inner cities and rural America. Here again we will hold our new President to his word when he compared our inner cities to Afghanistan and famously said in terms of voting for him: What do you have to lose? Let us make America greater beginning in Chicago, a city that he used as a negative example in one of the debates.

As the reality of a Trump presidency sinks in, let us take a lesson from President Obama and be reminded that: the presidency is bigger than any one person; a successful President Trump benefits all Americans; and we’re Americans first. We’re patriots first. To be an American is to accept the results of an election, to ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and to move forward. Let us follow the example of Abraham and walk forward as active participants in this remarkable experiment we call America. Let us fight to insure the rights of all Americans. Let us continue to believe that creating a heart of many rooms is as important in our time as it was in the time of Hillel and Shammai. The goal is not to agree, but to hear each other’s voices. The goal is to respond thoughtfully so that we continue the work of building a United States that fulfills the mandate of the Pledge of Allegiance - with liberty and justice for all. That is our challenge, our call, and our prayer on this day.
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So let us take our new siddur in hand, that repository of a Lev Hadre Haderim, the Jewish heart of many rooms. Let us offer a prayer in which we envision the blessing of an America fulfilled and consider what actions you will take to achieve that dream. Let us focus on a world that has always given Jews hope in times of light and in darkness, the word Halleluyah. Let us acknowledge the death of Leonard Cohen this week by applying his melody for this word to Adon Olam. Let us take all of the many rooms that are represented here today and join them in one voice of praise and hope for the future of the United States of America.