

## “A Counter-voice in The Conversation: Reflections on the Kavanaugh Hearing”

September 29, 2018

What a painful few days.

To be honest, it seems to me that the highest values and aspirations of our country's leaders are not all that different, even among those on separate sides of the political aisle. But the lens through which they see the world is radically different. The conflicts that emerge from this lack of shared perspective may be impossible to resolve. There is no space for curiosity and trust right now; there is only entrenched political opinion.

From my own perspective, I see not only a political problem but also a call for religious thought. It feels urgent; if Judaism is to remain relevant, a source of fire and light illuminating and guiding our path in the wilderness, it needs to be able to respond to moments like these. So what contribution might Jewish thought bring to the painful and embittered conflict that is now in the world's spotlight?

One of the great religious aspirations in Judaism is to lift up those who have been silenced, and care for people who need healing, have suffered, or need a political and spiritual voice. The liberal democracies of the West are not equipped to do this. This is not because people don't care. Just the opposite - people are passionate. But our current political structures and procedures so highly value the success of the individual, they marginalize serious and genuine moral reflection. I wonder: is there any path to developing a vision toward a shared moral good?

In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that the best a Western government can do right now is to try and deliver the maximum possible freedom to individuals to make their own choices. But beyond this freedom, political systems aren't offering much of a response to vulnerability and suffering. (p. 11-12) From a Jewish standpoint, that's horribly insufficient. We must recover those aspects of our ancient tradition that teach us about human solidarity, justice, and compassion, and most importantly, what's clear and non-negotiable: the dignity of every individual life.

The future relevance, integrity and vitality of Judaism doesn't rest on the most recent data of interfaith marriage; they rest on our ability to see and believe that every person is made in the Divine image. Every person must be listened to, cared for, respected and dignified with a response of generosity. Judaism insists we do everything possible to bring this vision into the world.

Is that what was on display these last couple of days? Were our leaders on both sides of the political aisle able to see the person before them, testifying, human, imperfect, confused, angry?

Rabbi Sacks suggests that the tenacity of Judaism, as is true with all faiths, is that it speaks to something enduring in the human character and human condition; it looks beyond the tribe, the city, the nation, let alone the political aisle, to humanity as a whole. The prophets of ancient Israel conceived of a God that transcended place and boundaries; they conceived of humanity as a single community linked by a covenant of mutual responsibility where justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a never-ending stream.

Reverence, restraint, humility, graciousness, ability to listen and respond to human distress – these are core moral qualities of Judaism. We are taught to transcend political ideology to see the person before us. This is where political systems are struggling, if not outright failing.

There will soon be an immediate question before the Senate: after hearing the testimony of a woman who shared a harrowing account of the sexual assault she suffered, will we still entrust the present candidate for the U.S. Supreme Court with the enormous responsibility and power of being a Justice in the highest court in the nation?

I can tell you: I worked for many years as a lawyer representing women seeking asylum in the U.S. because they were hurt over and over again by men. The testimony I heard Thursday reminded me of the women I met with, represented and tried my best to counsel. The testimony came from a deep and pained place. It was the sound of the paradox I have been talking about for five years here at Reyim: it takes extraordinary courage to say that we are broken, pained, and vulnerable.

I can tell you, Judaism teaches us to trust one who speaks from a place of humility and vulnerability. Perhaps due to our history as a people persecuted, exiled and subject to suffering of people with far greater power than us, Judaism warns us against trusting those who put forward their privilege and power to establish the content of their character.

I can tell you, Judaism teaches trust of the person who is gentle and kind to others. Eyzehu michubad? “Who is honored?” “Ha’micha’bed et habriot: one who honors others.” And Judaism cautions against trusting one who is combative, overtly political, impetuous or cannot or is unwilling to reflect morally and spiritually. “Who is mighty?” “He who subdues his passions, as it is written (Proverbs 16:32) ‘One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled is better than one who captures a city.’”

And yet - and you know me well enough to know there is always an “and yet” - even when we find ourselves clearly trusting one idea, or more poignantly, one person, more than another, Judaism hovers over us, insisting there is no single story that teaches us the entire truth. Both testimonies - “I am 100% confident” and “I am 100% innocent” - require us to listen to the person before us.

I want to share just one of the many passages in Talmud that teach us this principle: “The question is raised, what if someone should come to the House of study and see different group of students studying Torah, and one group says something is permitted while another group says it is forbidden, or the House of Hillel says that a vessel is pure and the House of Shammai says it is impure.” And the person says: How can I learn Torah this way? The answer is: All these words were given by one Shepherd, One God created them; One leader gave them; the Master of all things, Blessed be He, said them. What should you do? You should build many rooms in your heart and you should let in all of these words . . .”

This is a foundational text for Judaism: we are asked to hold different – at times conflicting - personal truths. As you know by now, this principle is pivotal to my vision of our Jewish community and our responsibilities to live spiritually, ethically and inclusively. As much as we may want to fight it, we are asked to allow for the possibility that dramatically different and opposing testimonies both contain truth. I have enough experience working with groups in deep conflict to promise you: the story that opposes yours is real.

Even with this mandate, however, what are the limits of this Jewish commitment? How far are we willing to stretch to let in different claims of truth? When does our religious, ethical, intellectual, psychological, spiritual and emotional commitment to honor multiple truths end, forcing us to say: “this is where I stand. I cannot accept that claim. I cannot accept you as a truth-teller. I am too limited, too human, to hold my heart out wide enough for your truth claim.”

We have all witnessed and experienced too much suffering to simply say to everyone, “come in, come in, to our circle of trust and truth.”

Today we will not come to an answer as to the truth of what happened or articulate one position of what our Senate must do (though like many or all of you, I have a very strong opinion), but rather, we are called today to recognize that whatever the outcome, there will be a great need for repair. I think our political system is fundamentally unequipped to elevate, honor and vote for justice, vulnerability, humility and humanity.

Where does this leave us? Here is what I have learned from the great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: Religious leaders should never seek power; but neither may they abdicate their task of being a counter-voice in the conversation of mankind. You are all kohanim, high priests, religious leaders, endowed with gifts of wisdom and compassion. Please join me as counter-voices to the conversation.

It's why we come here to a religious space: to utter a prayer that somehow changes, even very, very slightly, the substance of our lives.

Join me in my prayer that all those who tremble with memories of having been hurt find support and comfort.

Join me in my prayer that we understand - relentlessly, recklessly, resiliently - that each chance to treat a human being as a human being is an opportunity to honor the sanctity of life.