

Everything was going as planned. There was a particular order that was proceeding beautifully. The light created on the first day was good. On the second day, when the heavens were created, there was no comment. We can probably safely assume that was an OK day. The third day was extremely hectic. We're talking separation of ocean and dry land, which was good, then vegetation of all kinds grew, and it was all good. The moon and sun day, day number four, was also good. The fifth day, when all kinds of animals came to being was a good day too. Then on the sixth day, a human is created. That was certainly a good day. So after all this creating, God takes a break-we call this shabbat. That's the basics of the first chapter of the Bible.

Imagine how surprising after all this goodness, that in chapter 2 verse 18, God says that something is NOT good. After all this good stuff, what's not good? It's not good for a person to be alone. OK, I buy that, no one should have to be alone. So what's the solution? Find the perfect partner. One that you can live with in harmony and peace. So God can take care of this by creating another person and they could live happily ever after without any hassles, no arguing, no complaining. But that's not what the text says. The solution to this "not good" situation is that God creates an ezer k'negdo, which is usually translated as a "help meet". I'm not sure what a

help meet is, but an ezer k'negdo literally means an opposing helper.

Someone who is placed opposite another person and is there to help.

What the Torah is saying, is that people in any relationship are not meant to be clones of one another; rather they should complement one another.

Through having different ideas, feelings and perspectives, people can actually be of help to each other. I want to examine the role of debate and conflict in Jewish teachings.

I've left gender out of this discussion because I think it's not relevant. One can make a case that the intention of the text was to say that women are the opposite of men. I don't really buy that because that's too gross a generalization and I have found the Torah to be more nuanced than that. I think the question of gender is not the central concept here. What we find here is the model of relationship. What does it mean to be partners with another person as life time partners, friends, business partners or even colleagues. And how can we fulfill the mandate of being an ezer k'neged? Now I don't know about you, but I've found that my husband and I don't always agree. Some of the the things we disagree about are small things and others are more important issues. I think that's built into the structure of what it means to be two humans in relationship. Because if we always agreed, not only would life be boring, but we wouldn't have the chance to

learn from each other. We wouldn't be challenged to stretch our imaginations and see things from the other's point of view. God was trying to move from "not good" to "good" by creating an opportunity for us to learn how to negotiate disagreement in relationship. A partner or a friend has to be able to say no if that is what is needed—the 'kenegdo' part—because if you are in relationship with someone who always says yes (even when they don't agree) you aren't really being challenged by, or challenging another. In the end, a "help-opposite" creates its own unique synthesis, and a new oneness is born. Two people must drink together but not always from the same cup, so that one can correct the other, complement the other, comfort the other, help and be helped by the other. Only then is the one not alone. One person should be able to stand up to the other in a way that helps further each other's process of growth. Surely there have to be agreements about how to process these disagreements with respect and caring.

This model of relationship is a template for how we interact in community. So far we've looked at the relationship between two individuals but we find the same idea when it comes to the larger community.

The k'neged dynamic places a high value on dispute for the sake of increased learning and growth. As human beings, we need to learn how to

disagree while **remaining in relationship**. Instead of sweeping conflict under the rug, we are instructed to use our differences as an opportunity for reaching out to each other so that we are not alone. It was so important to the sages that people create learning opportunities in relationship that the Mishnah tells us we should not study Torah alone. Torah students were instructed to be in chevrotah, in partnership with another person, when they studied. It was understood that in chevrotah we would challenge each other to think more deeply about the concept we would be studying. In finding a partner who would challenge us, we would learn how to hone our abilities to think critically. Sharing our different reactions to a text we would take part in an exchange of ideas that would stimulate creative thinking. As opposed to a frontal model where teachers teach and students learn, in chevrotah, both partners are teachers and students. Chevrotah study can be quite emotional and the traditional study hall, where this method of learning still takes place, can be quite noisy. The goal of chevrotah learning is not to figure out who is right. Its value is found in building on differences with the goal of creating new and meaningful insights.

One of the reasons I love Judaism is that we are encouraged to question and challenge each other and our texts. We can see this most clearly in the Talmud, which contains stories, commentary, and legal decisions. The

Talmud -- rabbinic Judaism's most important text -- is in reality a collection of ancient debates. These debates include arguments one rabbi has with other rabbis who have been dead for hundreds of years. And, the minority opinions are placed along side the majority opinions. All of the diverse voices are included. Who knows, in the end, maybe the minority opinion will turn out to be the correct answer. If we lose the minority opinion we might be giving up on a precious part of our communal traditions. These debates are written down and preserved for future generations. They are not hidden away in some secret text. It's as if our rabbinic ancestors whisper, "Go ahead, just try to find a way to dispute my argument, I dare you!"

The truth is, most of us would rather avoid conflict. We are afraid of someone being mad at us or maybe we are so angry that we don't trust our ability to communicate constructively. Maybe we are convinced that we are right and don't want to take the time to try to explain our position. I learned this difficult lesson from a congregant who came to speak with me about something that was on her mind. I had done something that had hurt her feelings. I knew that I had been wrong but I didn't find the strength to approach her to apologize. When she asked me why, I realized that the only reason I hadn't initiated a conversation with her is that I was afraid.

Sweeping the conflict under the rug wasn't very comforting but I was able to live with it. After apologizing to her, I thanked her for her strength of character. I was grateful for the opportunity to clear this relationship and express my remorse for having hurt her. This experience helped me learn, once again, how important it is to deal openly and honestly with conflict. Unless we approach the person we are in conflict with, we can't really know the truth. We can see this dynamic in personal relationships but it is even more obvious in communal conflict. When we experience conflict in community we often make up stories to explain why we feel the way we feel. If I disagree with something someone has said or done, instead of investigating the reason this person holds this perspective, it's easier to go to a third person to validate my position. If I can convince the third person that I am right, then the person I am not talking with must be wrong. This behavior ignores the Jewish values of being an ezer k'negdo, learning in chevruta, and arguing like in the Talmud. It leads to gossip which harms the whole community, creating an environment of mistrust and fear. Sometimes we may not even know the end result of our gossip. It may lead people to act in ways that we never anticipated when we initiated the first conversation. These conversations usually happen over the telephone or in the parking lot. Conversely, if we talk with the person with whom we

have a conflict we may find a path towards learning and growth, like the ezer k'negdo or chevrotah model.

Here's the last teaching important to our understanding how Judaism values debate. Jews believe that there is a way about arguing that is sacred - a machlochet l'shem shamayim (an argument for the sake of heaven). A real community doesn't consist of people who agree about everything. In fact a strong community can be created over what people find important enough to argue about. By arguing with another, with respect and an open mind, we show we care, that we want to understand, and that we value the other. Blind agreement does not show commitment; it shows apathy.

Now there is also machlochet lo l'shem shamayim (an argument that is not for the sake of heaven). The rabbis teach that arguments that are not for the sake of heaven are ones that don't bring blessing to the community and they will not endure over time. According to the Mishna, it is not only important to consider what we are arguing about, it is important to examine how, and even more importantly, why, we argue at all. The rabbis chose to use the term for the sake of heaven with great care. Heaven represents endlessness, that aspect of our selves which is truly unlimited. When we argue for the sake of heaven we are open to hearing the other person's

perspective. So here's the question when we are involved in a debate about something: In this debate am I arguing for the sake of heaven, or is it really all about me? Holding on to our position so strongly even to the point of being willing to sacrifice a relationship doesn't necessarily mean that our cause is just. If we are trying to be an ezer k'negdo, an opposite helper, then the debate is for the sake of heaven.

I've been a part of TBE since 1980 and I have seen our congregation deal with many different issues over the years ranging from how we decide about dues structure, ritual practices and Israel. Lately, we have been learning new ways to negotiate conflict through our work with Speed Lease. Difficult as some of our meetings have been, we are actually experiencing what it feels like to communicate face to face, sharing our different ideas and working towards being able to listen to each other. I want to encourage all of you to attend our upcoming meetings on November 1st and 15th. Our tradition teaches us the value of this important work and helps us understand that arguing in a healthy way is built into the fabric of creation.

If you put two Jews in a room, they may have two separate opinions – maybe – as the old joke suggests, even three. What matters, as the rabbi's teach, is that we voice those opinions for the sake of heaven. As we go

forward, I pray that all of our discussions, debates, and even our arguments be sacred and may they bring healing, and holiness to our personal relationships, our community and our world.

Rabbi Paula Marcus

Yom Kippur 5770