

Take a moment and close your eyes, and call to mind a person in your life that you disagree with whole heartedly... not the TV character or the politician, someone you know. Someone you have a relationship with. Someone who sometimes makes your blood boil with their opinions and certainties.

Now hold them for a few moments.

Could there be any part of what they say that is in fact "right?"

I know it's hard to even consider the possibility that they may have some element of truth in their opinions - but this is what I will challenge you to be open to today.

For what is Judaism if it isn't an invitation to question and argue?

What is faith, if it is not fragile and free for debate?

Documentarian and historian Ken Burns reminds us, the opposite of faith is not doubt.

Doubt is central to faith.

The opposite of faith is certainty.

Certainty is what gets us stuck. It's what gets us into trouble.

Even when we are basing our opinion on what we believe to be fact, even if we're basing it on our own first hand account - certainty can be dangerous.

I'm reminded of a parable that says...

A group of blind men encounter an elephant for the first time.

The first blind man put out his hand and touched the side of the elephant. "How smooth! An elephant is like a wall." The second blind man put out his hand and touched the trunk of

the elephant. "How round! An elephant is like a snake." The third blind man put out his hand and touched the tusk of the elephant. "How sharp! An elephant is like a spear." The fourth blind man put out his hand and touched the leg of the elephant. "How tall! An elephant is like a tree." The fifth blind man reached out his hand and touched the ear of the elephant. "How wide! An elephant is like a fan." The sixth blind man put out his hand and touched the tail of the elephant. "How thin! An elephant is like a rope."

An argument ensued, each blind man thinking his own perception of the elephant was the correct one. The Rajah, awakened by the commotion, called out from the balcony. "The elephant is a big animal," he said. "Each man touched only one part. You must put all the parts together to find out what an elephant is like."

Enlightened by the Rajah's wisdom, the blind men reached agreement. "Each one of us knows only a part. To find out the whole truth we must put all the parts together."

This moral tale found in Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism is here to teach us about our own limitations. We can be 100% certain we are right based on "the facts." And yet later learn we are 100% wrong. Possibly because of our own limited knowledge. We are each only one person, informed but also limited by our own experiences. This is not to say we have done anything wrong. Except being too certain.

This summer I reread a book by Rabbi Brad Hirschfeld, an orthodox rabbi who works for pluralism in the United States. The title of the book is, **You don't have to be wrong for me**

to be right: Finding Faith without Fanaticism. We are living at a time of so much conflict, both at home and abroad, it seems a difficult statement to support. Us vs. them; Republicans vs. Democrats; black vs. white; me vs. you; my way or the highway —we are too often adamantly stuck in our positions and unable to compromise or understand or even tolerate the other side.

Now more than ever pluralism is necessary for us to thrive as Jews in this country. We must remind others and ourselves that there is only room for us to worship, to fit in at school and at work if we are committed to tolerating those around us to think differently than we do.

Judaism teaches, Who is wise? The person who learns from everyone. Rabbis expand on this, to teach that this is not just learning from the teachers, friends, sources, mentors, with which we fundamentally agree. But the person who truly listens and learns from all people. Especially those whose beliefs differ dramatically from ours. I try to take this lesson to heart.

You know that person you were picturing when we began? The one who sees the world differently than you? Well, I myself know a few of those people too. I have a relatives who I adamantly disagree with. People whom I share family simchas with, that have diabolically different political and world views than i do. Even what they write on line or on Facebook pains me to read... yet I still read it. Devouring

every word... trying to understand the counter view. Open to having dialogue and conversation.

Because I'm trying to remember... You don't have to be wrong for me to be right. I can love my relatives who post rants on Facebook. I can thoughtfully engage with my family members who disagree with me. I can see them as more than a set of opinions. I can respect them enough to listen for shared truths and the common values that unite us. What might they have experienced that would reveal a truth that I have missed?

Whenever we read or learn about history, or current events, we are obsessed with statistics and numbers. We listen to talking heads on podcasts and on the news make pronouncements of about winners and losers; right and wrong. But, what if we decided to see the world, not as black and white but through shades of grey. This is my favorite way to approach learning.

I have a fascination with reading memoirs, I love reading history from an individual's lens. rue, honest, complicated voices explaining how the events in their lives have affected them personally. Stories of women escaping their ultra-orthodox life, Trever Noah's book growing up in apartheid Johannesburg, Sofiya Sinclairs story growing up in a poor abusive Rastarian household, or Mosab Hassan Yousef's story of how he turned to Christianity rather than take on the reigns in Hamas leadership. Listening to an individual's lived experience is like a glimpse into their

vulnerabilities, their raw unique lens, rather than broad movements, and sweeping generalizations of conflict and history.

This is the way we should approach learning and forming opinions. I'm not telling you to ignore statistics and numbers, but I am suggesting we yearn for more than just one side representation of "facts." What is the story that the numbers eclipse? Who are the voices behind the anger, the inflammatory bumper stickers, the provocative tweets?

We need to try and remember:
You don't have to be wrong for me to be right.

It would be easier if there were clear and simple distinctions everywhere. If there was one right answer and no more. But Ken Burns quotes the journalist I.F. Stone who teaches that: "History is tragedy, not melodrama."

In melodrama all villains are perfectly villainous, and all heroes are perfectly virtuous, but this is not real life... this is only in a Disney archetype. The Torah is the best example of this. Our Biblical ancestors are neither villainous or heroic. They are all complicated, just like us.

Moses has a temper, King David slays hundreds of thousands of people, Miriam speaks ill of her brother, Sarah is jealous and laughs at God... the examples go on and on. There are no current day pure villains or heroes either. None

of us is without complexity and nuance. None of us, perfect and without sin!

You don't have to be wrong for me to be right...

Just with our biblical ancestors as with the memoirs that I devour, there are never simple stories. There were Nazis who saved lives, there was a Jewish fundamentalist that assassinated Rabin.

We are obsessed with the binary. But we do not live in a dialectical world. We are more than our strongest opinions, more than a single identity or a single truth.

Situations are not always right or wrong, rich or poor, gay or straight, Jew or Hamas, red vs blue. Everywhere we look situations are presented in miniscule moments, fit for the postcovid attention span. Shorts, snips of information, mega bites, tiktok reels, AI generated photos, misleading headlines. Right vs Wrong.

But what if there are multiple rights? What if there are multiple wrongs? What if we are certain that the elephant is sharp when – it really isn't.

Anytime I disagree with my dear husband, my children, a coworker, a congregant. I always try to accept deep down inside myself that no matter how passionately I feel about the position I am taking, I may be completely wrong. I work hard to recognize that no matter how self-righteous I may

feel- how many books on the subject I might have read, or podcasts I might have listened to, or streets I might have walked, I am not always right. There is always the possibility that I am not seeing clearly, or entirely. Or that we are both right!

I know that the world pushes us to make hard choices. We are forced to pick a side.

We have one vote and there is rarely a perfect candidate. Some choices must be made quickly——threaded into days fraught with work and caretaking; family and friends.

We don't always get to sit back and have a theoretical conversation about how to balance and choose.

But we also have the ability to remember - even after we've made our choice—— that we might have chosen differently. We can keep a window of doubt always cracked. A question mark left hanging. An opportunity to revisit your firmly held belief, and revisit a point you never thought you would consider from another angle.

I am reminded that often after natural disasters, neighbors come together to help each other. They ignore their differences in a moment of crisis. Liberal or conservative; black or white; rich or poor; old or young. During floods, people row their boats to pick up strangers from their roofs. When I was a rabbi in Santa Rosa menaced by wildfires, I was moved by people's ability to come together across differences. Away from social media and sound bytes, they saw only the person in need standing in front of them. What can we do, before disaster strikes, to think of each other as

people in the same leaky boat? People finding the courage to make our way, together, through the fire?

Remember the person we thought of earlier, the one we adamantly disagree with...

imagine there was a dystopia that existed where they were right.

Can you find a way theoretically to accept, maybe they are not completely wrong? And if you can't, can you think about how you would wish to be treated in this world where you are alone, and island in your rightness? What kindness and respect would you want? Let yourself try and find some spark of truth inside the beliefs of others. .

They don't have to be wrong for you to be right.

I know it's a hard task, but this is why we are here.

Its during this time of year when we reexamine our most inner selves.

It's in these hours and these days we can be vulnerable with ourselves.

From "The Place Where We Are Right" writes the renowned Israeli poet Yechuda Amichai.

Flowers will never grow

In the spring.

The place where we are right

Is hard and trampled

Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

Amichai's imagery suggests that certainty can dull the vibrancy of life, and that behind our certainty is a doubt that we often hide from. He calls on us to remember that doubt and love go together. Certainty in our rightness is cold and hard. Doubt is an open door where we can nurture our love for others. If certainty is a shout—sometimes in our righteousness, an aggression, then doubt is a whisper. Amichai's suggests that our job is to learn a new way to discuss what we believe: a whisper instead of a shout.

If we can remember this, and try to live by it. It will be a better year ahead. We will be less weighed down by anger. We will be less alone in our rightness. We will have more love for others. Letting go of our certainty may open the path for a better relationship. It may open up the opportunity to explore and believe. It will make room for true faith, and spiritual renewal.

If we can only remember:
You don't have to be wrong for me to be right.

The truth changes, beliefs change when more info comes into focus.

World was once thought to be flat, now its round.

Space travel used to be the jetsons, went to Nasa and now space x.

Doctors once told people to smoke to lower blood pressure.

Babies were supposed to sleep on their stomachs, and now it's on their backs.

Yom Kippur reminds us than none of us know the future. We are written in the book of life, and we don't know the ending. Time may reveal truths we rejected, caught as we are in this single moment and in our single lives. *Gmar Hatima Tovah* may you be written in the book of life... as a wise person. A person who listens. A person who leaves the door of doubt open. May you tune out the talking heads and the divisive anger, and find shalom, peace and renewal.
