

High Holy Days 2022 | 5783
Congregation Rodeph Sholom
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Machloket L'Shem America

Leonard Downie, Jr. served as the executive editor of the *Washington Post* from 1991-2008. He was also a devout non-voter. He explained, “We work hard here to not be biased and not appear to be biased. All our reporters and editors...are prohibited from engaging in any political or interest group activity except voting. And I even refuse to vote so that I never make up my mind which party, candidate or ideology should be in power.”¹ Len, as he was known to his colleagues, abstained from voting to prevent himself from deciding. Kelly Bryan is a 30-something American who has spent most of her life in Illinois and Oregon, which both overwhelmingly vote for Democrats in presidential elections. “If I lived in Pennsylvania or Michigan, I’d be first in line to vote.” Kelly Bryan doesn’t think her vote matters.²

When we talk about voting, we often highlight the debate between those who seek to expand voter access and those focused on voter merit. “How do we make it easy to vote?” is at odds with “Who deserves to vote?” As frustrated as we might feel by others’ beliefs, it is precisely this intellectual conflict that manifests the core of our political process. Journalist Adam Gopnik put it well, that “Politics is a way of getting our ideas to brawl in place of our persons.”³ We have a term for this in Judaism, *machloket l’shem shamayim*, an argument for the sake of heaven.

Allow me to illustrate: the Talmud tells a story about Rabbi Yochanan who took offense at a remark of his *chavruta*, his study partner, Reish Lachish. Reish Lachish was so upset at offending his *chavruta* that he fell ill and died. To comfort him amidst his grief, the rabbis sent a new *chavruta* to Rabbi Yochanan named Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat. Every time Rabbi Yochanan argued a point, Rabbi Elazar agreed. This infuriated Rabbi Yochanan who bellowed, “When I argued with Reish Lachish, he would raise twenty-four rebuttals against me to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the issue would become even more compelling and clarified.”⁴ The story goes on to tell us that Rabbi Yochanan grieved even more deeply for Reish Lachish until his mind became unstable and he died.

¹ “[Why I Don’t Vote](#),” Chris Cillizza, *The Washington Post*, 8 Nov 2016.

² “[Why Many Americans Don't Vote: And why for some, this year could be different](#),” Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, Jasmine Mithani and Laura Bronner, *FiveThirtyEight*, 26 Oct 2020 [accessed 12 Sept 22].

³ “[System Upgrade](#),” Adam Gopnik, *The New Yorker*, 12 Sept 2022.

⁴ Talmud Bavli Bava Metzia 84a

Judaism affirms that our beliefs are honed and shaped in conversation and often in contradiction to those in relationship to us. Our ideological sparring allows us to find greater clarity and purpose. The principle of *machloket l'shem shamayim*, an argument for the sake of heaven, can guide us as American citizens. It affirms that our voices do matter, and enjoins us to make a decision about who should be in power and to defend it. Our public square, just like our Jewish communities, is enhanced, not by some aspirational unanimity, but by our abiding discord.

Perhaps the great myth about voter engagement in this country can be encapsulated by President Abraham Lincoln's words at Gettysburg, "That a government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Too many citizens have been left out or have opted out of our political process for Americans to contend that we have yet reached this noble ideal. Wonder why?

Nowhere in the United States Constitution is there an explicit right or an obligation to vote. Instead, voting rights were defined and expanded through six different amendments ratified over the course of 103 years. None of these amendments *requires* Americans to vote, they instead confer upon Congress and the federal government the power to enforce the amendments' protections through legislation.⁵

Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren is perhaps the person most responsible for transforming the theory of universal suffrage into a practical possibility. His 1964 majority opinion in *Reynolds v. Sims* affirmed that weighting votes differently is discriminatory, thus providing judicial precedent for the idea of one person one vote.⁶

And lest we deceive ourselves that the recent spate of voting restrictions has critically wounded voter turnout, the 2020 presidential election saw the highest levels of voter participation since 1900. But before we get too hopeful, allow me to disappoint you. In 1900, a 73% turnout was only 18% of the population⁷, compared to two years ago when 67% turnout meant 48% of the population.⁸ Just to drive this point home, in 2020, 80 million Americans still did not or could not vote.⁹ Never in our nation's history have we installed a government that truly derived its just powers from the consent of the governed.¹⁰

⁵ "[What Does the Constitution Say About the Right to Vote?](#)," Mac Brower, *Democracy Docket*, 3 Feb 2022 [accessed 1 Sept 22].

⁶ "[Reynolds v. Sims \(1964\)](#)" *National Constitution Center* [accessed 3 Sept 2022].

⁷ "[Drawing Lines](#)," Louis Menand, *The New Yorker*, 15 Aug 2022.

⁸ "[Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections](#)," *The American Presidency Project*, UC Santa Barbara [accessed 15 Sept 22].

⁹ "[Poll: Despite Record Turnout, 80 Million Americans Didn't Vote](#)," Domenico Montanaro, *NPR*, 15 Dec 2020 [accessed 29 Sept 2022].

¹⁰ Preamble, United States Declaration of Independence.

Maybe, just maybe, if only 48% of our population is participating in our elections, we're missing some key voices. Maybe it's easier to see things in black and white when more than half of the perspectives are left unheard. Instead of us *in chavruta* with them, it's us versus them. We compete to trounce and demoralize the other political party, when we should be shouting and swapping with one another.¹¹

And so let's consider another, more modern midrash, about our matriarch Sarah. We read on Rosh Hashana, *acharei ha-devarim he-eleh v'eha Elohim nisa et Avraham*, "And so it was that, after those events, God put Abraham to a test" (Gen 22:1). Our midrashic tradition asks, which events is the Torah referring to? "The events with Sarah," we learn.

"And God tested Sarah." The angel who came to Abraham, went to Sarah first. The angel said to her, "'Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and take him to the land of Moriah, and offer him up [as a sacrifice].' And Sarah said: 'No.' Because a mother does not slaughter her child." When Sarah awakens later to find that Abraham and Isaac are gone she calls out to God, "I know that one who slaughters his son in the name of God will be left without a son or a God." She begs God to forgive Abraham and save her son. At that moment the angel appears to Abraham, with his knife suspended mid-air, and tells him not to lay a hand on Isaac.¹²

We read the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac, and we grapple with the impossibility of Abraham's predicament. How on earth could our patriarch agree to sacrifice his child, the son he and his beloved Sarah waited a century to welcome, the single spark of potential that the Israelite legacy would endure? I shudder at his callousness and wrestle with a covenant predicated on such a violently blind faith.

But all of that changes when we learn that the angel approached Sarah first. All of this changes when the black and white binary of faithlessness vs. sacrifice is imbued with the color of Sarah's dissent. How much more relevant and profound does the Akedah become when we see the tension between a parent's desire to protect her child and a person's desire to serve God? When we give voice to Sarah, the Torah becomes more human.

There is a classic law of logic, first established by Aristotle, the law of the excluded middle, which says that if one side of an issue is right, then the other must be wrong—there is no in-between.¹³ This law governs the current tone of our public square and is applied erroneously and often to the greatest wedge issues of our day. Abortion, gun control, immigration, and voting rights are written about and reported on with a ferocious drive to force us to side with

¹¹ "[System Upgrade](#)," Adam Gopnik, *The New Yorker*, 12 Sept 2022.

¹² "Sarah and the Sacrifice of Isaac," Rivkah Lubitch, *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* (Waltham: 2022), pp. 32-34.

¹³ "[The Irresistible Effectiveness of Wedge Politics](#)," Matt Peterson and Abdallah Fayyad, *The Atlantic*, 8 Dec 17 [accessed 2 Sept 22].

righteousness or evil. There's no nuance. Perspectives, like that of our matriarch Sarah, which could bridge the gap over a seemingly irreconcilable chasm, are left out.

Rabbi Yochanan died because his soul was starved of the single meaningful relationship, nurtured by difference, that sustained him. If we continue to drain all the color and nuance from the core concerns of Americans, I fear our republic could face Rabbi Yochanan's fate.

The principle of *machloket l'shem shamayim* can also be understood as an argument for the sake of God. And I believe that this translation contains an instruction - that no matter how fierce our disagreements, we must be vigilantly conscious that the spark of God dwells within the people most at odds with us.

This is the season of beseeching God, *shema koleinu*, hear our voices. We affirm repeatedly in our liturgy that our voices do matter. If we have the audacity to demand that God listen, are we not obligated to do so ourselves? We need to learn how to argue again, how to restore the excluded middle, how to emulate our forebears by seeking depth and clarity in disagreement. And we'll do best by our country and by our Jewish tradition when we make sure that every American has a voice and a vote.

Before the Akedah, we see Sarah featured in a very different light. She mercilessly forces Abraham to expel his son Ishmael and her servant Hagar from their family home. While Sarah's behavior is unconscionable, God appears to Abraham and instructs him, "Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice" (Gen 21:12). From one chapter of Genesis to the next, Sarah transforms from cruel master to courageous mother. Because Jewish tradition assumes Sarah's complexity and dignifies her with the space and time to grow, we better appreciate the evolution of her voice. How might we salvage relationships with those who differ from us, if we only treated them like Sarah?