**Stay at The Table – Yom Kippur Day – 5787 –** Rabbi Andrea Merow

I want to tell you something personal—something I find painful, and something that wasn't true of me ten years ago. I have become more cautious about telling you what I think- not only what I believe, but where I struggle, where my thinking is complicated, and where my conclusions are still unfinished.

Many of you want your rabbi to speak about the difficult questions facing the Jewish people and the world. And I want to speak about them. But there is another reality: we live at a time when people increasingly expect those they trust—and perhaps everyone else—to agree with them. When they don't, disagreement can lead to disengagement.

This is, of course, not my issue alone. It is an issue for all people; siloing, social media, and polarization all put us in our own echo chambers.
So, on this Yom Kippur, one of my *al chets* is this:
For the sin of remaining silent when I should have spoken.
And for the sin of approaching those with whom I disagree with fear or anger, instead of curiosity.

I am not alone. Many of my colleagues have become more careful about sharing complicated, nuanced, sometimes unfinished thoughts because we know how fragile our communities can be and we want them to remain whole. So, in our effort to protect our communities from division, we sometimes stop speaking about the complex issues that are part of contemporary life.

This is now a societal problem: in our families, in our Jewish community, and throughout our country. Something troubling has happened to our capacity to be curious about people who see the world differently than we do. When someone we know, someone we respect, someone we live alongside, tells us that they believe something radically different from what we believe, our first response is rarely:

"Tell me more. How did you come to see it that way?" Our first response is more likely bewilderment. Or anger. We do not simply think the other person is mistaken. We begin to suspect that they are foolish. Or immoral. Or dangerous. And we no longer listen.

And so, on this Yom Kippur, I ask myself: Have I listened only long enough to prepare my rebuttal? Have I protected myself from the discomfort of discovering that another person's story is more complicated than I imagined? Have I reduced someone created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, to a single opinion? Or do I not even know what they think, because it has become easier not to speak at all, than to disagree?

I have been thinking about these questions for a long time. Then, this summer, I encountered two women who have every reason in the world not to be curious about one another, every reason not to listen.

And yet they do.

Their names are Elana and Layla. I met them on a *tiyul*, a trip, with the Hartman Institute. The trip was called "Seeking Peace in a Time of Fear and Anger." That day left a profound impact on my *Neshama*, my soul. Elana welcomed a busload of rabbis into her beautiful home in Tzur Hadassah, Israel. She told us about her son, Yanai Kaminka, *zichrono livrachah*, who Hamas terrorists murdered on October 7.

Before she told us about his heroic death, she wanted us to know about his life. She wants Yanai to be remembered for who he was, not only for how he died. Yannai was a loving son and brother, a self-taught composer and pianist, and a young IDF commander who took the mentoring part of his role seriously. When his soldiers were assigned night duty, Yanai would visit them on his own time to talk—to learn about them. His entire life, he was intensely curious about people. On October 7, Yanai's recruits were serving their first guard duty. When the attack began, he and his fellow officers sent the young recruits to shelters. Yannai defended his base long enough to allow Kibbutz Zikim time to defend itself. He saved many lives. Yanai died a hero.

Sometime after *shiva*, grief-stricken, Elana and her husband joined the Parents Circle–Families Forum, a network of bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost immediate relatives to this conflict. Its members choose the extraordinarily difficult work of listening to one another. Israeli and Palestinian members tell their stories, demonstrating that even people carrying almost unbearable loss, even enemies, can hear each other if they choose to do so.

After leaving Elana's home, we drove to meet her friend Layla near Beit Jala. Before the war, these two women would have had little chance of meeting, let alone becoming close friends. They still disagree about much. Elana is a Zionist Jew who moved to Israel from America decades ago. Layla is a Palestinian mom living in the West Bank/Judea, who yearns for self-determination for her people. Each carries the history and pain of her own people. Each could easily believe that hearing the other's story would somehow erase her own.

When Layla approached our bus, the first thing I saw was Layla and Elana embracing. Elana wore jeans and a T-shirt. Layla wore a hijab. Later I observed something else. They could finish each other's sentences. Layla told us that more than twenty years ago, her six-month-old son died after being exposed to tear gas intended to drive out a suspected terrorist. By the time the family was permitted to leave town to reach a hospital, it was too late. Layla grieved. For years, she seethed with anger.

And then, like Elana, she made a deliberate and difficult choice. She chose to set her anger aside and join the Parents Circle. She chose to listen to the other. These women do not pretend that their histories are the same. They do not surrender their convictions. They do not abandon their peoples. They have learned to hear a story that is not their own—and may even challenge their own—without running away from it. By listening, they have come to recognize the stunning humanity in one another. And perhaps even a glimpse of God.

This is not a sermon about how to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I sadly do not have answers to that conflict. This sermon is about what Elana and Layla ask of us: to listen across deep disagreement.

Sitting on that bus, I thought: If these two women, each carrying the death of a child and the pain of her people, can listen deeply to one another, then surely I can work harder to choose curiosity over contempt in the disagreements in my own life.

Because the opposite of polarization is not agreement. It is curiosity. We do not have to think alike to hear one another. As Americans, as Jews, as families, even as a *shul*, we do not have to think alike—but we do have to remember that we belong to one another.

Our tradition has a name for this kind of disagreement: *machloket l'shem shamayim*—a disagreement for the sake of Heaven, one that is meaningful. Its classic model is the long-standing argument between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. They disagreed about matters both ordinary and profound: how to light Hanukkah candles, how to celebrate a wedding, who is liable for damages, ritual, and civil law.

The Talmud teaches that the law generally followed the House of Hillel because they were gracious and humble. Because they tried to see and understand Shammai's view, and taught the opinions of the House of Shammai before teaching their own. Imagine the discipline that requires: To explain the other person's position so fairly that the other person recognizes it as their own.
To make room for an argument you may reject without rejecting the person who makes it. To understand before insisting on being understood.

Hillel and Shammai disagreed about questions that affected core elements of Jewish life, yet their families continued to marry one another. They argued—and yet, still trusted one another with their children. It reminds me of the lovely relationship between Justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. They did not agree in most court cases, but their families vacationed together.

Judaism does not ask us to stop having disagreements. Open up a Talmud, and you will find arguments on every page. Our Judaism asks something harder of us. It asks us to argue without demonizing the other.

The Talmud teaches, *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayim*—"These and those are the words of the living God." That does not mean every claim is correct. It does not mean moral differences do not matter. Curiosity does not require us to excuse hatred, tolerate cruelty, or remain in unsafe relationships. But far more often than we admit, the person across from us is not dangerous. Sometimes they are, and with those we hold our ground. But most of the time, the person we disagree with is a human being, created in the Image of God, whose experiences have led them somewhere different from where our experiences have led us.

I tried to practice this over the summer when I met with the Democratic candidate for the 12th Congressional District. I met with him because he may become our representative in Washington, and I thought he should know something about our community.

As I expected, we did not agree about foreign policy at all. But we each came to listen and to be heard—not necessarily to change the other's mind. We found areas of agreement on domestic policy. We disagreed and still encountered one another as human beings. It may have been the hardest meeting I have ever had with a politician. And I would do it again. Because as Americans, we need to be able to say to one another, "Help me understand how you came to see it that way." And then stay long enough to listen to the answer.

If Elana and Layla can remain in relationship across profound disagreement and grief, kal v'homer, how much more should we, the members of a family, or a friend-group, or a synagogue, be able to remain in relationship with one another?

When I came to this community more than five years ago, we desperately needed healing. We were grieving the very tragic loss of our beloved rabbi. We were emerging from the devastation and isolation of the pandemic. And we were carrying divisions about many topics that had been building for years.

At that moment, we needed *shalom bayit*—peace in our house—and this meant sometimes not talking about the subjects we knew could divide us.
I think that was right for that moment.
But I wonder if we are ready for something more now.
Possibly the next stage of *shalom* is not avoiding disagreement.
Maybe it is discovering that our relationships are strong enough to hold disagreement. We are One Shul, One Jewish People, and now, more so than at other times in our history, we -need -each -other.

*Shalom* need not mean arriving at the same place. It can mean remaining in relationship with one another. Peace isn't always the absence of conflict; it can be remaining somewhat whole, holding it together, even when there is conflict.

I want to be less afraid to tell you what I think. And I want you to be less afraid to tell one another—what you think. And I pray we can each be open to listening to the other's narrative, and to even potentially be changed by it. Not because we will always agree, but because our relationships matter. Our community matters. And the issues matter.

After the *shiva* for Yanai, Elana, his mom, did not want to hear only the beautiful things people remembered about her son. He had, after all, recently been a teenager. So she gathered his closest friends and asked, "What was the most annoying thing about Yanai?"

They laughed. And then they told her: Yanai always left half-finished cups of Turkish coffee everywhere. On the counter. On a table. On the edge of the sink. A small, maddening habit.
The kind of thing you complain about for years—and would give anything to complain about once more.

At the end of the 30-day mourning period, Yanai's family and friends brought cups of Turkish coffee to his grave. They drank together. They cried. They smiled.
And then they left their half-finished cups behind. When I was at their home this summer, Elana and her husband served us Turkish coffee.

The coffee story did not remain a private joke. Elite Coffee, produced by the Strauss Company, began a campaign in Yanai's memory, distributing two packets of Turkish coffee with words about Yanai's curiosity and a note encouraging people to share a cup of coffee with someone they did not know—or perhaps someone with whom they disagreed.
And now, I ask the same of you.

When you leave, we'll have packets of Israeli Turkish coffee in our lobby.
Take a card, remember Yanni, and invite someone you disagree with to have coffee. Next week or next month, not today, of course.

As Elana explained, Turkish coffee is not smooth.
It is strong, gritty, and a bit bitter. The grounds remain at the bottom of the cup.

Real conversation can be like that. It is not neat. It leaves a residue. It asks us to sit with complexity.

Yom Kippur asks us not only to confess unkind deeds and words we have spoken. It also asks us to examine the conversations we have refused to have: the people we have dismissed, the questions we have been unwilling to ask, and the relationships we have allowed disagreement to sever.

And so, today, let us ask ourselves: Whom have I stopped being curious about? Whom have I reduced to a label? Whose humanity have I allowed my anger to obscure? And with whom might I

sit down again—not necessarily to agree, but to listen? Choose to have the cup of coffee with the person who votes differently than you, reads the news differently than you, or understands America or Israel differently than you. Listen carefully enough to understand their position before you respond. Be curious about their opinions until you understand them. Not to agree. To understand.

Stay at the table long enough to discover the story beneath the opinion. The conversation may be strong. You may not change each other's minds. There may still be grounds at the bottom of the cup. Take the coffee. Sit with someone. Speak honestly. Listen with curiosity. And even when the conversation is strong and gritty, stay at the table.

*G'mar chatimah tovah.*