

Bamidbar 2018

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 5/19/18

This is not a joke: What do Michael Keaton, Andrea Mitchell, Oprah Winfrey, Queen Latifah, Michael Bloomberg and Anita Hill, and Apple CEO, Tim Cook all have in common? The answer is that all have given college commencement addresses in the last week. (Anita Hill, by the way, was the choice for Rutgers Law School commencement this past Thursday in Camden.) And you can be sure that as graduation season approached and commencement speakers were announced, universities no doubt braced for yet another season of controversy over their choice of speakers. And no wonder: A recurrent, troubling theme in the news media is that college students' support for free speech is diminishing, especially when they find the speech offensive. According to a survey from the Brookings Institution, a plurality of college students today - fully 44 percent - do not believe the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects so-called "hate speech," when of course it absolutely does. More shockingly, a narrow majority of students - 51 percent - think it is "acceptable" for a student group to shout down a speaker with whom they disagree. An astonishing 20 percent also agree that it's acceptable to use violence to prevent a speaker from speaking. As the Brookings findings indicate, many younger Americans seem to have no grasp of what our First Amendment says, much less of the kind of speech it protects.

Back in 2012 Barack Obama addressed the UN General Assembly reminded the international community (who needed to hear it) that, unlike many others, our country protects even hateful writings, films and speech. He said, "We do so because in a diverse society, efforts to restrict speech can quickly become a tool to silence critics and oppress minorities." He added that "the strongest weapon against hateful speech is not repression; it is more speech - the voices of tolerance that rally against bigotry and blasphemy, and lift up the values of understanding and mutual respect." Intelligent disagreement is the lifeblood of any thriving society. Yet somehow we are failing to understand, let alone teach the next generation the art of disagreement. Understand that when we say the words "I agree," whether it's agreeing to join a club, align with a political stance or party, or subscribe to a religious faith, we are helping to create community, and that's a good thing. Community is based on people who agree on certain basic principles. We want to belong and community is the way we share ideas, ideals and values with like-minded individuals. But vibrant communities from synagogues to democracies, are made more vital, and indeed stronger by those who can say "I disagree." These are the words that define our individuality, give us our freedom and move communities forward. From Abraham our Father to Natan Sharansky, the words "I disagree," coupled with the courage to say so, have defined the Jewish People. The ability to say "I disagree" has fostered the sense of individuality that makes us proud to be Jews. The very word "Hebrew" means "the one who stands apart." We are, in essence a religion founded on disagreements. And we do not censor. It is that delicate balance between community and individuality that is at the heart of what it means to be the Jewish People.

In this week's Torah portion we read about how the Jewish People were divided into tribes, each marching under its own banner, each with its own unique tribal identity. And the Rabbis ask a logical question: If it was so important for the tribes to be organized in this way - to have their marching orders, as it were - then why did Gd wait until 13 months into the journey to explain it? And the Sages answer that the tribes could not be given their own individualized banners until

after Matan Torah when the entire nation stood "as one person, with one heart." All together they heard Gd's voice and committed themselves collectively to His commandments. In other words, they had to get to "I agree" before they could have the firm foundation on which to disagree. It's the Torah's way of saying that a delicate balance must be maintained between uniformity and individualization in religious practice and in Jewish community. *Matan Torah*, an experience shared equally by the entirety of the Jewish people, created that sense of community. But the tribal arrangement in the wilderness, each tribe marching under their own flag, signified that opinions would not be uniform, and yet individual identity would be respected. Only after *Benei Yisrael* committed themselves collectively and uniformly to the same basic set of rules could they then divide themselves into different tribes, each with its particular tasks and responsibilities, and (yes, one can well imagine), their own strong opinions.

America was founded, I believe, on that very same set of principles. The right to disagree is fundamental to our democracy. And disagree we do. We disagree about racial issues, immigration, health care, foreign policy and, of course, the 45th president. And we express our disagreements in internet and TV rants in ways that are increasingly virulent; street and campus protests that are increasingly violent; and personal conversations that are increasingly embittered. But here our Jewish values can help to protect the democracy that we all, in our hearts love, for Judaism is, as I said, a religion founded on disagreements. The Talmud is in essence one long argument. But the Talmudic arguments were not personal. They were not polemical. No one was shouting anyone else down. They were based on understanding competing opinions and then disagreeing based on knowledge. According to our sacred code of disagreement, we have to read deeply, listen carefully and watch closely what others are saying and doing. We need to grant our adversaries moral respect; give them the intellectual benefit of doubt; have sympathy for their motives and listen empathically with their line of reasoning. And we even need to allow for the possibility that we might yet be persuaded by another opinion. In other words, we must march together, even if we each salute a different banner.

Jewish tradition emphasizes humility, a commodity in increasingly short supply today. We are taught that Torah is like water, seeping down to the lowest point where it can bring new growth. A hardened exterior causes the water to move elsewhere as it looks for open spaces to rest. We can create that open place inside ourselves through humility. The humility to allow others to disagree. The humility to investigate divergent opinions, and the humility to admit to yourself (and others) that you might be wrong. Judaism and democracy go hand in hand, and so, as we begin a weekend devoted to remembering those who helped to make our country what it is today, let us recommit to bringing our Jewish values to the cause of American democracy and the intellectual and political freedom that defines us.