

The Teachings of Rabbi Irwin Kula - Part One
Delivered November 10, 2012 by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick

Shabbat Shalom. This week we will be beginning a three week sermon series on the teachings of Rabbi Irwin Kula, a Conservative Rabbi who will be our Scholar in Residence on Thursday night December 6. Rabbi Kula is the head of CLAL, a Jewish think tank that pulls together Jews of all walks of life and inspires them to think about their Judaism in new and exciting ways. Rabbi Kula will give a talk that is free and open to the public.

I first met Irwin Kula when I was starting out as a young undergrad at the Seminary and he was in Rabbinical School. He was, as his name suggests, a really cool guy - bright and witty with a great sense of humor and a sweetness that was obvious to anyone who met him. He served as Rabbi in several congregations before becoming an author and lecturer through CLAL, The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. I have heard him speak on numerous occasions and he is both provocative and reassuring at the same time; he makes you think, question and doubt, and yet I always walk away from his sessions feeling better about myself as a person and as a Jew.

In a sense, this is a new series we are beginning here today, and yet it can also be seen as a continuation of where we left off last week. For those of you who were not here, I was speaking about the price we pay as a society for the cynicism that is behind the attack ads that inundated our lives prior to the election. That proved to be a popular sermon; we can all agree that cynicism is a bad thing and that the attack ads often went over that line. And yet, at the same time, as some of you pointed out to me after the talk, not all ads were equal. Some were just vicious, but some contained more than a kernel of truth. Some of the ads raised interesting and important issues that deserved closer attention. But if you had already made up your mind about who you were voting for pretty much nothing that an ad could say would change your mind, or even get you to doubt the positions taken by the candidate of your choice. No compromise could take place in the charged pre-election environment; you had your opinions and you were sticking to them. And the candidates had to encourage you to hold the line. But now that it's over holding the

line leads to gridlock and stagnation. Now that the election is over it is time for reconciliation and yes, compromise.

Today I want to talk about compromise for what is true in the political world is also true in our personal lives, and Rabbi Kula has a lot to say about that. The reason we gravitate to the singular messages of campaign ads is because they are simple. They present issues in black and white and it's easier to think in black and white than it is to think in color. It's easier to stake a position and hold a line than it is to open yourself up to examining and even legitimizing the opinion of other. And that may be OK in the heat of a campaign whether it is a political campaign, or the campaign to convince your co-worker or client, or your spouse or your child that she is making a mistake, but at a certain point you have to wonder what the cost of winning really is in terms of the long term health of that relationship. You might win the battle only to lose the war. And on this Judaism also has a lot to say:

You will remember that in the beginning of Genesis, Gd says famously, "Let US make man in OUR image." Who is Gd talking to??? Well, the Rabbis say it was to the angels. There is a fascinating verse in Psalms (85:11) that says Rabbi Kula quotes: It says, "Kindness and Truth have met; Justice and Peace have gotten together." And the Rabbis of the Talmudic period imagine that just before the creation of man angels representing kindness, truth, justice and peace actually get together and have a conversation. And what do they talk about? Rabbi Simon said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create man, these ministering angels were divided into camps and factions. Some said, "Let Gd create man;" others said, "Let Gd not create man." Kindness said: "Let Gd create man, for he will perform acts of kindness." Truth said, "No, let Him not create man, for people will be full of deceit." Justice said, "Yes, let Him create man, for he will perform righteousness." Peace said, "No, let Him not create him, for people will be full of divisiveness...." So what did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took Truth, and cast it to the ground for if Truth (with a capital "T") were the full measure of a person, no one could exist for very long. So Gd cast out Truth with a capital "T" so that kindness and peace to live alongside justice.

And this is more than just a nice story - it gets to the heart of all of Jewish learning - and therefore at the heart of what it means to be a Jew. The Talmud does not give singular answers, or "Truths with a capital T". The Talmud invites us to entertain contradictions. It is, as Rabbi Kula points out, filled with truths tumbling over other truths. It is filled with a myriad of opinions. The word Bet Midrash means "House of Seeking" as much as it means house of study. If you come to the singular, black and white Truth there is no more room for seeking. That's why we have Hillel and Shammai's opinions to this day. But, as Kula points out, we are taught that the reason Hillel's arguments are usually accepted as the halacha is precisely because Hillel was more willing to entertain the idea that Shammai might be right. Hillel taught that there is partial truth in nearly every opinion. But, the fact that there are partial truths in opinions that are diametrically opposed does not mean that there is no such thing as greater and lesser truths. The process of study and learning and decision making is discerning which are the greater truths and that can only be found by considering the veracity of the lesser claims as well.

Imagine a world, your world, where you stop to legitimize the counter claim in your own mind because that's what it's going to take. If you simply acknowledge the other point of view, whether it is in politics, or more importantly personal relationships - but you have not embraced the truth of the opposing position - you'll never be able to have meaningful compromise in your life. You may be right, but you may also be alone. And I'm not talking about simply "agreeing to disagree". Jewish Tradition pushes us to broaden our horizons to entertain multiple truths. And no, it's not simple, it's not clean, it's not cut and dry/black and white. That's why Irwin called his book "Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life." But in the end we will be better people, with stronger families, more productive workplaces and a more civil society when we understand that living in color is better than black and white even if it means embracing that messiness; the messiness that is sacred because it's where true meaning can be found.

So the question I ask you now is, "Are you willing to let your guard down enough, are you secure enough, confident enough and open enough to embrace this philosophy? Irwin puts it this way: We all want our kitchens to be neat and clean with everything put away in its proper place,

but if we don't mess them up from time to time we'll never have home cooked meals. Being open means running the risk of having a messy kitchen inside sometimes, but the benefit is truly being at home with yourself and the people who share your world...