

EREV ROSH HASHANA 5778

“Matt Joyce!” The words reverberated thru our home this past May. A player on my fantasy baseball team got injured and needed to be replaced. My son Ben, who manages the team with me, told me that we should take Oakland Athletics outfielder Matt Joyce.

You need to understand . . . for years, Ben had told us about Matt Joyce. He was a mediocre player, at best, constantly disappointing and not a popular choice as an injury replacement.

But Ben noted that his exit velocity rate and launch angle were much improved. He still hadn't done all that much in terms of the traditional baseball statistics that I follow, like batting average, runs batted in, etc. but Ben assured me that these new stats showed that Matt Joyce was on the verge of a very solid season.

Still, I was dubious, to put it mildly. From out of the kitchen, Ruthie yelled out “Matt Joyce? No, don't do it!” Even she, whose baseball experience is largely limited to rooting for the Red Sox and against the Yankees, had heard all that she needed to know about Matt Joyce. However, Ben can be very persistent and I agreed to take Matt Joyce . . . for a week and we would see what happened after that.

Fast forward to the present, four months later and Matt Joyce has, indeed, had quite a respectable season, other than being suspended two games for an offensive comment to a fan. Not a star player, to be sure, but much better than mediocre. I was certain that I was right . . . and it turned out that I was wrong.

We live in a nation which is deeply divided and polarized. Frankly, more unsettling than most mainstream opinions is that everyone seems certain that they are infallible. Right wing or left wing, Trump lover or Trump hater, everyone knows that they are 100% right and those who disagree with them are 100% wrong.

The problem, of course, is that this thinking is anathema to a Reform Jewish community. We are not religious fundamentalists. When we see and hear people declaring that only one perspective is valid, we scoff at them or worse. To see the world with only one correct option is abhorrent when we are dealing with religious fundamentalists. However, we don't seem to have the same objection when declaring that there is no valid political perspective, other than ours.

Most of us in this sanctuary live in reasonably similar worlds. The differences in our lifestyle and daily routine are minor compared with many others, such as those with no personal connection to Judaism.

Ten years ago, I attended a ceremony at the Dominican Convent of Sparkill. There, right next to St. Thomas Aquinas College, stands a huge facility which houses many Dominican sisters and nuns. Their daily routine of prayer and study, plus how they viewed and experienced the world, was dramatically different from my reality.

One month ago, I was invited to spend a Saturday evening with a local Muslim community. The people were very friendly, but their music, dress and worship were very different from what I was used to. Though I was welcomed warmly, I recognized that while their house of worship was very close to mine, this was not my community.

The truth is that we all live in a variety of communities which, for the most part, we select. These communities offer us friendship, support, fulfillment and much more. When they fail to offer us these benefits, we often leave and find a place that fits us better.

When we think about our friends at work, at play and online, it is likely that we have a lot in common with them, including age, standing in life, as well as political and philosophical perspectives. While many of us are critical of politicians in Washington and elsewhere who shield themselves from a diversity of opinions, the truth is that most of us do the same thing.

No branch of mainstream Judaism believes in declaring that ours is the only path and that we know it all. Especially at this time of year, we need to be humble and to realize that people of similar intelligence and comparable background can look at a situation, a person or an event and understand it completely differently than we do.

For two thousand years, Judaism has been about dialoguing with those who see things differently from us. The central collection of Jewish law, the Talmud, is made up of over sixty books of rabbis discussing and debating what God wants from us.

Talmud doesn't just present one way of looking at the world. In fact, it frequently presents both the majority opinion and the minority opinion. Talmud recognizes that people may disagree and yet, they may both be correct! "Eilu v'eilu divray Elohim Hayyim, both these and these are the words of the living God!"

In order to move forward, in order to make progress, we have to expand the sources from which we gather information. I know that two of my kids are horrified when I tell them that I regularly spend some of my time watching a cable news channel, which does not generally coincide with our political perspective.

When we listen to others, we can learn a lot, whether or not we come to agree with them. If we are to break the partisan log jam in Washington, then all of us, secular and religious, Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, Trump supporters and Trump detractors, nationalist Zionists as well as pacifist Zionists, will have to be willing to listen and to be open to compromise.

If we cannot compromise, we risk condemning our loved ones to the fate of the Palestinians, whose all-or-nothing political leadership has brought their people decades of devastation, decline and misery.

Yes, it would be emotionally satisfying to proclaim total victory, to have our hand lifted high by the referee after a political debate. The reality however, is that life is not a competition. We have to live with one another and grant others the dignity and respect we would want from them. As such, being certain and even being right are not necessarily virtues. That which will bring about the best result is often the right answer.

We know that we are right, when it comes to how the world and how our nation should move forward. We can argue strongly and convincingly for our causes. Yet the sages who fashioned Judaism after the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, understood that seeing the world differently does not mean that other people are evil.

Today, many of those people are our family, friends, teachers, students and fellow congregants. We can learn from them and them from us, that there are pros and cons to the issues which confront us. Very little is very easy, but a closed mind will not grow. We may not be swayed by the thoughts of others, but if we want them to listen to us, we have to be willing to listen to them.

America is all about having the right to express unpopular views. Sometimes, those views are expressed by people whom we love, sometimes by people whom we don't.

In the past year, many relationships have been tested, if not broken. For loving families to break up because of political disagreements is tragic. More and more, we are failing to talk with one another; instead, we are talking at or about one another.

To achieve victory while debasing and demeaning others is truly a hollow victory. A real victory is one in which all sides feel that they have achieved something of what they wanted. The way we get there is by listening. We don't have to agree, but we need to listen. We may even learn, if we dare! AMEN