

A wise colleague once cautioned that we “preach from our scars, not from our wounds” - that is to say, we learn best from, and teach most effectively about, the past only after we’ve had time to reflect on it. But there are moments that call on us to speak up, to continue a conversation, without the benefit of a long drawn out reflection period - and it is possible that after more reflection, we will (I will) see things through a different set of eyes. But to talk about anything else is to ignore the elephant in the room. It is in those moments that we lean hard on the relationships that we’ve built over the years and ask for an open ear and a reflective heart.

Earlier this week, members of our congregation got an email from the outgoing president, the incoming president, and me, sharing that we had rescinded our job offer to the rabbinic intern that we had planned to hire.

Ostensibly, we withdrew the offer because he had put his name on a controversial and divisive letter that was signed by nearly 100 rabbinical students. This letter asked us, as American Jews and as members of Jewish institutions, to empathize with the Palestinians’ plight, to cry with them, and to feel their pain. It also used inflammatory language to describe Israel’s actions (that most agree were defensive in nature), neglected to mention empathy with the pain of Israelis, and was written & signed as rockets were falling on Israel.

I want to reframe this for us. I ask you to consider this, perhaps the contents of the letter were not why rescinding the offer was the right move for Temple Israel. This moment is not about the intern, the letter that he signed and then unsigned, or what any one of us believes about Israel. Our

decision is a direct reflection of how we collectively act (or react) right now as a community. Simply put, we are not in an emotional place where introducing an intern with this controversy would result in a meaningful experience for the community or for him. Our community currently needs to be led by people who will help soothe the unease caused by too many traumatic events in the past few years, not those who wish to do the work of pushing institutions into new frontiers. I am eager for the time when we are ready to undertake any challenge as a united community - but we're not there yet.

Friends, I have to say this: we are in deep pain. We are not the best, healthiest versions of ourselves right now. Long-time members of the congregation have told me that they're still learning how to manage the trauma from Rabbi Starr's abrupt departure 7 years ago. Newer members point to the more recent rabbinic transition and the divisions in our community stemming from that. And all of us understand the pain of having spent the past 15 months physically withdrawn from our communities.

And so, the decision not to bring on this intern at this moment was, incidentally, the best move for our congregation because it would have hindered the healing that we so desperately need to do. We must step back, breathe, and evaluate why we are where we are today and where we want to be as a community, so that we can make healthy decisions.

One problem many of you have with the choice made by shul leadership is that you feel it draws a line in the sand for beliefs - that it is policing

people's thoughts and opinions. Let me be very clear: it is unhealthy for any community to have a litmus test of acceptable thoughts that its members can have. Even in a religious community like Conservative Judaism, there is a diversity of beliefs that is incredibly valuable to the health of the organization. Labeling thoughts that we disagree with as being outside our tent is a dangerous precedent to set.

The Talmud, in Eruvin 13b, recalls that:

שְׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים נִחְלְקוּ בֵּית שְׁמַאי וּבֵית הַלֵּל, הִלְלוּ אוֹמְרִים: הַלְכָה כְּמוֹתֵנוּ, וְהִלְלוּ אוֹמְרִים:
הַלְכָה כְּמוֹתֵנוּ. יִצְאָה בֵּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה: אֵלּוּ וְאֵלּוּ דְבַרֵי אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים הֵן, וְהַלְכָה כְּבֵית הַלֵּל.

*For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The halakha is in accordance with **our** opinion, and these said: The halakha is in accordance with **our** opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the halakha is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.*

From this we derive the principle of *Elu v'Elu*, a teaching that we ascribe to in this community. We have two siddurim, three High Holy Day services, a number of minyanim, and multiple rabbis to choose from, all because “*elu v'elu*” - these *and* these are all valid. It should not surprise anyone to hear that this congregation's past, present, and future rabbis have different beliefs and follow different paths. That doesn't imply that one is right and the other wrong; rather, it means that there are multiple truths.

For each of you who has told me that we shouldn't police thought, I have heard from another member who points out that "actions have consequences." And both are absolutely right - elu v'elu. But in some cases, actions can be undone; some mistakes are fixable, some errors need not have permanent consequences. A different congregation, perhaps a less fractured one, would have reacted differently to this situation. It saddens me that we aren't there yet.

The Torah gives us an example in this week's parsha about an eerily similar situation that we can learn from. Miriam speaks out against Moses, and in doing so she tarnishes his good name; she is punished for this when God gives her leprosy. Aaron gives a very similar defense to what we might say about our intern: he pleads that the act wasn't done with any malice. Yes, it was wrong, but it wasn't done with an intent to harm, just a lack of impulse control. Even Moses, the injured party, intercedes and pleads to God on Miriam's behalf.

God insists that there be a consequence - Miriam is removed from the community for seven days, after which time she is readmitted. And during her temporary exile, the entire Israelite camp waits for her. Miriam learns her lesson, but she is still welcomed back into the community.

So I ask us, this past week, did we follow God's example? Or did we hasten to teach this intern a lesson, to tell others that Temple Israel - in this case seen as "they," not "we" - had hired someone whose views challenged ours? Most of us had never heard of Emmanuel, let alone met him in person; and yet we closed our hearts to helping him learn from this

experience, from his mistake, and in doing so, we chose a harsher course of action than even God did. Regardless of your point of view, I would like to suggest that we need to at least consider the possibility that this was a mistake on our part.

The role of a rabbinic intern in a congregation is to learn how to be a rabbi; any good that they do for the shul is secondary to the value that they gain from the experience. Their growth comes from direct mentorship with the supervising rabbi, observing and shadowing congregational leaders, and trying on the role of rabbi in small moments. In a good relationship, it is a growing experience for the intern, the mentor, AND the congregation.

The rabbinical-student-shaped hole in our leadership team this year should serve to remind us of the growth and healing we need to lead ourselves through.

It is clear to me that this week can not be the end of the conversation on Israel. No one gets to “win” this conversation. If you agree that we did the right thing by un-hiring our intern, we need you to continue these conversations. If you think we made a grave mistake and should hang our heads in shame, we need you to continue these conversations. Elu v’elu.

A number of you have asked if this divide can be healed. Perhaps we’ve been through too much trauma, and dealt with too much drama as a congregation to come back together. Perhaps we’re just following the trend of the divides in our country becoming more and more polarized.

I do not believe this, and I don't think you do, either. But change takes time and hard work, and it's not something that can come from someone else. Each person hearing this is responsible for helping to mould the Temple Israel community into one that they are proud to call their own. The issue at hand is neither the intern and his judgment, nor our views on Israel; those are merely the catalysts that are bringing our communal pain and divisions to light. We are a community of people with passionate viewpoints on those topics. It is time to channel that energy and devote it to the larger work that we must undertake together.

To help with this process, I have begun reaching out to a variety of resources - community thought leaders, rabbinic mentors, and Resetting the Table, the group that we brought in a few years ago to help us begin to learn how to talk with one another about Israel. We are not allowed to simply say that we cannot deal with one more controversy. If we do that, then we have learned nothing, and we are doomed to repeat this situation again and again. Instead, we must lean into our discomfort and embrace the difficult conversations, to better ourselves now and to allow ourselves to heal for the future.

If you are interested in being part of a team that focuses on bringing our community back together and engaging over differences, I invite you to be in touch with me after Shabbat. Over the next few weeks, please watch your email for information on a book group, for opportunities to be in dialogue with one another, for dates to hear speakers, for information on

how we're doing board training, and for more chances to begin the healing process that is necessary to rebuild our community.

If you are committed to being part of a vibrant traditional egalitarian Jewish community, then we want you. You don't get to change other people, but you do get to decide that your voice has a place here - along with everyone else's. We are a family. We may disagree often, but our shared foundation of a deep love of the Jewish people and our shared desire to support an active, engaged Jewish community will sustain us as long as we continue to engage with each other and strive to improve.

My friends, I want us to be a congregation that allows for mistakes and repentance - and I think you do, too. I want us to value multiple perspectives, even when those views push our buttons and rub up against the boundaries of who we think we are. I want us to be the kind of people who assume the best in others and see potential for learning & growth, rather than thinking we need to be the ones who teach someone why they're wrong and we are right. I want us to be a congregation that chooses to engage in the hard work of self-improvement over settling for the status quo or walking away.

I truly believe most, if not all of you want these same things. And I'm sure you know this, but here it is anyway: we're not there yet. There's a long road between here and there.

But we must successfully navigate through this journey, because we need one another. Deep down, we are a diverse community. Some of us hold dual membership with Young Israel, while others also attend Temple Sinai. Some of us go to the AIPAC conference, and some of us go to J-Street. We are young singles and couples; we are first-time parents; we are empty-nesters and grandparents and even great-grandparents. There is even room in our faith-based community for those whose faith is shaky or non-existent. We are heterogeneous, and that is a feature, not a bug.

It is incumbent on us to learn how to live with the tension of being together and being different from one another. Doing so gives us the opportunity to learn from each other, to expand and grow, to consider new perspectives and strengthen those we have. That can't happen as much - or at all - in a small, homogenous community, and without that growth... what are we?.

We must commit to hearing one another, deeply and diversely. *Elu v'elu*. After dozens of parlor meetings last year, an astonishingly high number of you told me, "it doesn't matter what I think, I'm in the minority." We can't all be in the minority - unless there is no majority. And if there is no majority, then we can either fracture and fizzle out until there is no one left, or we can do the hard work of transforming ourselves into the congregation that we want to be. I choose the latter, and I hope you will, too.

Shabbat Shalom.