

## Rabbi's Message February 2022

Dear Friends,

As the old joke goes: What do you get when you ask the same question of ten different Jews? Eleven opinions! It's funny, because it's true. At the same time, there's more to the joke than mere self-effacement, because not only does it spotlight a truth about our cultural eccentricities, it also focuses on one of the religious cornerstones of Jewish tradition; we are heir to a tradition that not only *tolerates* multiple perspectives, it actually *demand*s it.

It may seem counterintuitive to celebrate disagreement as a necessary component in the search for truth, but in point of fact it is exactly within such a milieu that Judaism truly succeeds. When understood properly, disagreement is a necessary prerequisite to the opening of doors to a healthy, productive, and successful path forward.

Not that we encourage bickering or baseless positions of argument, but it is one of the fundamental truths of Judaism that we make the very best decisions only when we are confronted with a healthy marketplace of ideas, all competing one against another.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the Talmud, our tradition's fundamental record of Rabbinic wisdom, is the fact that when all is said and done, it wouldn't be so terribly wrong to describe this treasure as being an extended chain of competing answers to a bunch of questions. Even more remarkable is the fact that in the midst of this fabulous abundance of opinions, almost never are we ever given the definitively "correct" and accepted answers to any of those questions. This is because tradition values the search for understanding, and the questions that are asked along the way, even more highly than the arrival at specific answers themselves, given that it is so often in life that there simply isn't just one single right answer that is universally applicable to every person. Again, this is not to say that some opinions aren't flat out wrong and unworthy of consideration, such as the notion that our government is seeking to implant microchips to read our minds through the vaccination process, but when we get down to it, one of the beauties of life is that each child of God is indeed unique. Regarding the most personal issues in life, there are as many (or more) answers as there are people asking the questions. In addition, if the only opinions we ever consider are the ones that come naturally to us anyway, chances are we'll never find deeper meaning.

This notion comes to life especially vibrantly in the traditional mode of Jewish study called *hevruta*, in which a small number of students (usually two) sit across the table from one another, debating the meaning of the sacred text they are reading together. Whether or not the study partners reach consensus is irrelevant. The true value of learning in *hevruta* partnership is in considering the challenges our partner throws at us.

To put it more artfully, as is done in the Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 7a 8:

[תענית ז' א:ה](#)

אמר רבי חמא (אמר רבי) חנינא מאי דכתיב (משלי כז, יז) ברזל ברזל יחד לומר לך מה ברזל זה אחד מהדד את הבירו אף שני תלמידי חכמים מחדדין זה את זה בהלכה

Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 7a:8

**Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “Iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend” (Proverbs 27:17)? This verse comes to tell you that just as with these iron implements, one sharpens the other when they are rubbed against each other, so too, when Torah scholars study together, they sharpen one another in halakha.**

Indeed, if the whole point of study is to sharpen our understanding, how better to sharpen a knife than to rub another piece of metal up next to it in a way that causes productive friction? So long as we attempt to go through life avoiding all possibilities of discomfort and challenge, we can be sure never to grow as thoughtful thinking human beings. Which brings me to the point of this message that I am writing to you.

As you’ve no doubt heard by now, the School Board of McMinn County, Tennessee found it appropriate recently to remove Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, which depicts his parent’s traumatic experience during and following the Holocaust, from the school curricula. Ironically, the decision came not because of concerns about the unspeakable horror that is presented in the story, but because:

“the book includes a few ‘cuss’ words, as one county school board member put it, and depicts nudity (that is, illustrated animal nudity). The offending phraseology was ‘bitch’ and ‘god damn.’ Of course, it’s ridiculous to object to an account of the mass murder of 6 million Jews and millions of others because of salty language and (animal!) nudity. But that’s what happened. Spiegelman **told** the *New York Times* it seemed to him the board members were asking, ‘Why can’t they teach a nicer Holocaust?’”

(this quote from the article at <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2022/02/the-inside-story-of-the-banning-of-maus-its-dumber-than-you-think/>)

Friends, we cannot sit silently and just watch this kind of thought-control close the minds of our children, because if we do, how will we ever be able to live up to the promise we made just this past week, on International Holocaust Memorial Day, that we will not permit such an atrocity to happen ever again? The horrors of history repeat when we do not remember them well enough. We cannot afford to allow the next generation of America to grow up ignorant of the Holocaust, even if – and especially if – learning about it causes friction, because it is only with that friction that they will be able to sharpen their minds to live life as responsible and upstanding citizens.

And while we’re at it, let’s commit also to forbidding *any* book to be off-limits, no matter how challenging or offensive. Yes, there will be books that require skilled teachers who can place them in proper context (such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) but so long as we forbid our students from being confronted by sharpness of reality, we are merely dooming our own society to harmful dullness. After all, how is it that we protect ourselves from being cut in the kitchen as we prepare dinner? By keeping our cutting knives extra sharp. It is the dull knife that causes injury when cutting, not the sharp one.

And remember, our objection to this kind of censorship cannot be limited to matters of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. As strongly as we object to the School Board of McMinn County,

especially those whose objective is to address issues of racial equality, ethnic, religious, and gender dignity.

So for those of you who are in between books right now and looking for something worthwhile, I encourage you to click [https://www.barnesandnoble.com/b/banned-books/\\_/N-rtm](https://www.barnesandnoble.com/b/banned-books/_/N-rtm), peruse their assembled list of “banned books,” and choose to read one of them yourself. As well, I encourage you to borrow it from your local library (even if you already own it) rather than purchasing it, in order to let our librarians know that there is demand for them. We cannot allow closed minds to keep our society in the dark. These books must remain available to all who seek to read them, because, as Oscar Wilde pointed out, “The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame.” If we refuse to see our own shame, how then will we ever find our own glory?

*L'Shalom,*  
Rabbi Dubin