

**You don't have to be wrong for me to be right.** Living at a time of so much conflict, both at home and abroad, it seems a difficult statement to support. Us vs. them; Republicans vs. Democrats; black vs. white; me vs. you; my way or the highway—we are too often adamantly stuck in our positions and unable to compromise or understand or even tolerate the other side.

But let me say it again and let it sink in: **You don't have to be wrong for me to be right.** And it's not just me saying it: it's the title of a 2008 book, subtitled "Finding Faith Without Fanaticism," by Brad Hirschfeld, an orthodox rabbi who works for pluralism in the United States.

The challenge of pluralism is very much on my mind right now, having spent part of my summer at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. On its website, Shalom Hartman defines itself as "a pluralistic center of research and education ... redefining the conversation about Judaism in modernity, religious pluralism, Israeli democracy, Israel and world Jewry, and the relationship with other faith communities." Even lectures I attended that were not explicitly about pluralism were embedded with pluralism because of who was sitting in the room: rabbis of all denominations, and, at times, Muslim and Christian leaders as well.

The experience was, to say the least, impactful. Growing up as a Reform Jew, I often felt "less than...", possibly that I was subscribing to a watered down faith, that the conservative or modern orthodox shuls down the street were in some way more authentic than mine. So I guess I wasn't too surprised when rabbinical school started with an unannounced contest to see which future clergy could out-Jew the other: who was holier-than-thou, more ritually observant, more Jewishly knowledgeable, and more "above the fray" than everyone else. Of course, this contest was somewhat ironic at Hebrew Union College, the seminary where the right to challenge orthodox

practice and develop more modern, meaningful ritual was conceived.

Today, I am a really proud Reform Jew. For the first time, this summer I did not feel less authentic or less Jewish because of my brand of Judaism. And I didn't feel the need to judge anyone else's hypocrisy or authenticity. This was a huge breakthrough for me, and my newly developed comfort with myself completely colored my experience in the multi-denominational cohort at Shalom Hartman. I had taken the first step towards pluralism: I learned that if we can become comfortable with our own choices, we won't care how our observance compares to someone else's. **You don't have to be wrong for me to be right.**

My days at Shalom Hartman were filled with talks and talking, punctuated by field trips. For instance, I travelled with a cohort of rabbis and Muslim leaders to the Yitzhak Rabin Center in Tel Aviv. This new museum highlights the intersections of Rabin's life with Israel's history. Reviewing the creation of Israel and all of its wars alongside Muslim leaders was eye-opening, to say the least. Our narratives didn't align, but the conversation afterwards was fruitful.

The experience was not without its own irony. In our discussion after the field trip, fellow Hartman fellow Rabbi Josh Brodie, from Boca Raton, FL announced that all morning friends and family from his orthodox community had been texting him, antagonized by their assumption that he was attending the Gay Pride Parade that morning in Jerusalem. First, you need to know that despite his hip Doc Martin shoes, Josh is not only an orthodox rabbi, trained at a seminary that is as orthodox as they come, but he admits to being a conservative Republican. You also need to know that the Shalom Hartman Institute, with its pluralistic mission, is not well regarded in ultra orthodox circles, and neither are gay pride festivals. But Josh proudly told our group that his texters

were even less thrilled to hear that he was actually at the Yitzhak Rabin center, and with a group of Muslim leaders. Remember, Rabin was murdered in 1995 by a Jewish right wing extremist who was convinced, after the Oslo Accords, that he was selling out Israel to the Palestinians.

In Israel questions of pluralism are always political. There is no separation of church and state, and therefore the different denominations cannot just quietly go to their separate corners to practice according to their beliefs. In Israel, the challenges to pluralism are played out in the courtroom, in the classroom, at the graveside, under the chuppah, and even at the Kotel, that sacred fragment of the western wall of the Second Temple.

Over the summer I was able one morning to join many other men and women attending a service organized by Women of the Wall, an organization of Jewish women who strive, against many orthodox protests, to achieve the right to wear prayer shawls and pray collectively at the Kotel.

Despite the fact that that the Israeli government passed a bill last January ensuring an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall, sadly, it has not actually come to fruition. That morning I observed behavior that was despicable! Was this Clal Israel?! Evidence of this pluralistic Hebrew expression, claiming that all Jews are “All people of Israel,” was nowhere in evidence. I saw Jews (and it doesn’t even matter what side they were on) tear up prayer books. Jews yelling nasty comments at other Jews! Jews desecrating a Jewish holy site with shameful behavior, seeded in fear.

I know I don’t have to point out to you that fear gets in the way of pluralism in America too. I heard a very accomplished young Muslim woman participate in a panel discussion at the Hartman Institute. She shared a heart breaking story. She grew up in an observant home and enjoyed wearing her hijab, the veil traditionally worn by Muslim women. Yet again and

again she noticed that people treated her poorly on the subway in New York, in job interviews, and at the grocery store. It was impossible for her to get a job. So she experimented with removing this sacred garment... and suddenly no one was giving her fearful, sideways stares. She was instead treated with respect and hired almost immediately.

To me, this story was devastating! Our country was founded on religious freedom but fear threatens to take away those freedoms—and remember, if the religious freedom of one group is targeted, other groups will not be far behind. Of course this is true not only in America, but across the globe. Brad Hirschfeld writes, "We live in a world where religion is killing more people than at any time since the Crusades. According to the U.S. state Department, seventy to eighty percent of world's conflicts are based on religion." ISIS is slaughtering people in the middle east, religion plays a part in the genocide in Africa and the turmoil in Bosnia.

As we sit here on Yom Kippur morning, reflecting on the errors of the past year and hoping for a better year ahead, perhaps thinking about how each of us can promote pluralism, and learn how to be right without others having to be wrong, might help us live happier, healthier lives in a safer, more tolerant world. This is a good moment to reflect on how our religious beliefs, our faith, can help us achieve this. Rabbi Hirshfield teaches that,

“Religion captures the very best and very worst of who we are, and to see only the best or the worst of religion is a dangerous error. If you see only the good, you become an apologist and take no responsibility for the incredible violence that religion is so capable of unleashing. If you see only the bad in religion, then you miss all the biggest questions, the most profound longings, the deepest fears

and greatest aspirations that define us. **When faith is working right it can be profound, inspiring, and a great force for positive change in the world, and it can help us lead more giving, productive, and fulfilling lives.**”

The microcosm in which I participated over the summer offers a glimmer of hope. If pluralism can be achieved in a room full of all denominations of Jews, and Christians, and Muslim leaders, then pluralism can be achieved in our homes, on our streets, and in our hearts. We can begin with the simple dictate: **You don't have to be wrong for me to be right.** We can learn to be comfortable with ourselves as a first step in becoming comfortable with others. We can stop insisting on being right at the expense of others having to be wrong. Rather than paint ourselves into a lonely corner, or isolate ourselves on a deserted island, we can choose to act as members of a tribe, and as concerned, thoughtful, tolerant, active citizens of our country, and our world.

This is not only a lesson for the public sphere but it is also important for our personal lives and relationships as well. If we insist on being right and others being wrong above all else, we might just demolish the things we love most. Last election cycle I fought so ferociously with my husband that many times the arguments would end with me screaming at him that he was a monster. It was not the type of home I wanted to create, nor was it true. I try to keep this lesson close to me. When Adam and I fight. I always try to accept, deep inside myself, that no matter how passionately I feel about the position I'm taking. I maybe completely wrong. I work hard to recognize that no matter how puffed up or self righteous I may feel, Adam is smart and thoughtful, and caring, and I must trust that his views are also completely valid and have legitimate weight. Brad Hirshfield points out that no matter how defining or

important our positions might be they, do not override the love and respect that we share; we are more important to each other than the ideas that divide us. When we make that leap, virtually anything is possible. Even though we still don't agree politically, we have found a better way to discuss this year's election without calling names or raising our voices. Pluralism is hard, everyone wants to be right, but the cost of proving others wrong is too high.

From "The Place Where We Are Right" writes the renowned Israeli poet Yechuda Amichai.

Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.

The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plow.

And whisper will be heard in the place  
where the ruined  
house once stood.

You don't have to be wrong for me to be right, In the year to come if we can internalize this mantra and build pluralistic bridges in our homes, on our streets, and in our hearts ...our world will be stronger, and if we can set aside our fears and embrace the people with whom we disagree most fervently we will be happier.

YK 2016

