

RH2 2026: "From the Place Where We Are Right"

There is a [famous scene in Fiddler on the Roof](#). Tevye is standing on the sidelines of an argument between two men of the town. One of them says, "Why should we get involved in the political struggles in Russia? Don't we have enough problems of our own?" Tevye turns to him and says, "You know, you're right." The second one shakes a fist and says, "You're a fool - the world is changing. We can't close our eyes to everything that's happening today." Tevye turns to him, and says, "You know, you're right." A third person wags a finger and says, "Tevye - you said HE'S right, and you said HE'S right. They can't both be right!" Tevye says to him, "You know - you're also right!"

We laugh - Tevye is a lovable fool.

But I'm not sure he's actually the fool in that scene. Who in that scene is actually open to learning something new? The two people arguing are just staking out positions - they're talking **at** each other. The bystander is just looking for a winner - or maybe he enjoys poking holes in people's arguments. We all know people like that. (Sometimes **we** are people like that.)

But only Tevya is able to hear - and consider - more than one voice.

He's not making a complicated argument about pluralism, or complexity, or diverse viewpoints. He's trying to keep the peace. But he's able to stand in the middle of two people who are totally at odds, and say, "I hear you. Both of you. I don't know how to resolve your conflict. I don't know how close either of you is to being correct. But I'm not just going to assume that one of you is 100% right, and the other is 100% wrong."

Tevye's approach is in short supply these days. We're living in a polarized world, and each of us knows - or is made to feel that we **should** know - which side is right about a lot of things. In our heads and our hearts, we are often open to some doubt, some nuance. We wrestle with how to think about the news, about our

political life, about Israel, about parenting, about how to be healthy; about the future of the Jewish people, the future of our country, the future of the planet. You name it. We might have strong convictions; but at least sometimes, we are able to see the merit in views that differ from ours. We have at least a little bit of inner Tevye.

But in public life, that capacity shuts down. Because we are living in a culture — and increasingly, a Jewish communal culture — where admitting you can see the other side doesn't make you thoughtful. It makes you suspect. If you acknowledge any merit in a position you oppose, you must not really believe what you claim to believe. If you change your mind about something, your old position gets dragged out as evidence that you were never trustworthy. The price of nuance has gotten very high. And so we pay the price of certainty instead, which is that we stop asking tough questions. And polarized extremes go unchallenged.

Rosh Hashana arrives each year, asking that we cultivate the ability to ask tough questions: not primarily about the world, or about people who have disappointed us, or dysfunction in the public sphere. About ourselves. *Teshuvah* -- repentance, return -- calls on us to return to our deepest selves and our core values - and from that place, muster the moral courage to reconsider. Being willing to admit doubt doesn't make us weak. It makes us courageous. And if we won't or can't, we become brittle.

The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, wrote a poem about what happens when we lose the willingness to listen to one another. He wrote it in Hebrew. I'll share it in English, but then we'll unpack some key pieces in the original. He writes:

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.

מִן הַמָּקוֹם שֶׁבּוֹ אָנוּ צוֹדְקִים
לֹא יִצְמַחוּ לְעוֹלָם
פְּרָחִים בְּאֶבֶיב

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a courtyard.

הַמָּקוֹם שֶׁבּוֹ אָנוּ צוֹדְקִים
הוּא רָמוֹס וְקָשָׁה
כְּמוֹ חֲצֵר

But doubts and loves
break up the world
like a mole, like a plow.

אֲבָל סִפְקוֹת וְאַהֲבוֹת עוֹשִׂים
אֶת הָעוֹלָם לְתַחוּת
כְּמוֹ חֲפְרָפֶרֶת, כְּמוֹ חֲרִישׁ

And a whisper will be heard
in the place where the house once stood,
now in ruin.

וְלִחְיִשָּׁה תִשְׁמַע בַּמָּקוֹם
שֶׁבּוֹ הָיָה הַבַּיִת
אֲשֶׁר נִתְרַב

This poem is tragic, and the tragedy hinges on one of the first words.

מִן הַמָּקוֹם שֶׁבִּרְאָנוּ צוֹדִיקִים

“From the place where we are right.” The Hebrew word Amichai uses for “[we] are right” is *tsodkim*. It might sound familiar. It shares a root with *tsedek*, justice, and with *tzedakah*, righteousness. Being right, and being righteous — in Hebrew, they're the same word.

That's the danger.

We arrive at our certainties through real commitment. Through outrage at real injustice. Through our love and desire to protect real people. Through experiences that made us who we are. And then - we stand our ground, unmoving, until the ground packs down. And from the place where we are right — where we are *righteous* — flowers will never grow.

Pay attention to that image: ground that is hard and trampled, like a courtyard. A courtyard is a shared space. A public town hall, a meeting with a political leader, a Shabbat dinner table, a nonprofit board meeting, a Facebook discussion. It's the place where we encounter other people. And Amichai is telling us that our righteousness has stomped it flat. The soil is dead.

Not because we were wrong to care. Not because we hold strong commitment. But because we do nothing but stand our ground, and defend it. We speak and don't listen. We stop being willing to learn.

There's [a cartoon](#) from almost 20 years ago about a man sitting at a computer in his pajamas. (We know it's an old cartoon, because today it would be a phone.) We hear a voice from the other room - “Honey, come to bed.” He replies, “I can't! Someone is **wrong** on the Internet.”

What does Amichai offer as an alternative? Not argument. Not evidence. Not better talking points. No. He says: דִּבְּקוֹת וְאַהֲבָה *doubts and loves*, break up the hardened, impervious world like a mole, like a plow.

Doubts. And loves.

Not certainties — doubts. Not victorious arguments — loves. The things that soften packed earth are vulnerability and attachment, not force. The mole works underground where no one watches. The plow turns the surface over, exposing what was buried. Both are necessary. Neither is accompanied by shouting.

Think about the hardest conversations you've had in the past year or two. It was probably about politics or Israel. But not necessarily. What made it hard, painful, unproductive? In my experience, those conversations often feature two people marshaling evidence like ammunition: convinced that if only they could overwhelm the other voice, if only they would see the world the way I do, then everything would be OK.

Those kinds of conversations seldom really work. And the collateral damage can be very real. It can leave relationships flat and trampled.

But think about the conversations where someone started from a different place. Not "here's why I'm right," but "here's what I'm afraid of." Not "how can you possibly think that," but "help me understand what brought you there." Those conversations are rare. They're challenging. And they create fertile earth: the possibility of real understanding. Ground for something new to sprout.

There is a section in the Talmud that speaks to this need to be able to hear those we disagree with. [Talmud, Eruvin 13b](#). It's in the context of a dispute on a specific issue between two schools of thought - the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel (*Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel*), who famously didn't see eye to eye on much.

It says, about this specific argument, "For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. One said: the law is according to our position. The other said: the law is according to our position."

Finally, a divine voice emerged to settle the dispute. The voice proclaimed: *Elu v'elu divrei Elohim chayim* Both these and those are the words of the living God."

(We hear an echo of Tevye here - you're right - and you're right too!)

But the voice continues: "However, the law should be carried out according to the opinion of Beit Hillel."

The Talmud then asks the obvious question - if both sides are right, if the truth is big enough for more than one honest approach to be valid - then why do we follow the House of Hillel?

It replies: "Because the students of Hillel were *nohin v'aluvim* — gentle and yielding. And because they taught the words of Beit Shammai *before their own*.

Consider that for a moment. The House of Hillel ultimately carried the day, because before they stated their own position, they stated the position they disagreed with. They held the opposing view up to the light. They treated it with respect. They made sure they understood it well enough to **teach it**. And **then** they gave their view.

That is spiritual strength. The courage to consider the truth of other positions, and to be open to what we might learn from them - even if we ultimately disagree.

David Hartman begins one of his books with this text from the Tosefta, Sotah 7:7:

עשה לבך חדרי חדרים והכניס בו דברי ב"ש ודברי ב"ה

"Make for yourself a heart of many rooms, and bring into it the words of the House of Shammai and the words of the House of Hillel."

What an amazing metaphor: make within ourselves room for many different viewpoints. Hold them in tension, but let them all live together.

So the question I want to ask of us, and of myself, this year: how many rooms does your heart have?

A heart with one room is a fortress. It keeps people out. It is very secure, and very lonely.

A heart with many rooms is a home where others can visit, or join you. There is a room for what you know. There is a room for what you don't know yet. There's a room for ideas that challenge you, or disturb you, or leave you unsettled. In a heart of many rooms, you make space for the possibility that you are wrong about something you feel certain about.

Rosh Hashanah asks us to walk through the rooms of our own hearts and notice which ones we've locked. Whose voice have we stopped being willing to hear? Which door used to be open, but is now shut - and why?

Now —let me be clear. I don't want this to feel like a sermon advocating spinelessness. No one should understand me as saying, "Everyone has a point, all perspectives are valid, be nice to the people who want to hurt you, if we all understood each other there would be no conflict."

I am not saying that.

Not every room in the heart should be unlocked and flung open. Some walls are load-bearing. Tear them out and the whole house collapses. We are not under any obligation to let visitors take a sledgehammer to those walls.

The room that says all people are created *b'tselem Elohim*, in the image of God -- with no exceptions — that room is not up for renovation. The room that says equality and the rule of law protect everyone, including us — that wall stays. The rooms that say antisemitism is real and must be opposed; that we cannot hold all members of a group collectively responsible for the worst actions of any one member; that freedom and safety are for everyone— those are rooms with load-bearing walls.

We know, this year especially, that some of these load-bearing walls are under stress -- in our own hearts, and certainly in the hearts of our nation and of our people. We know that there are people and movements that would like nothing

better than to tear those walls down. And there are times — Amichai knew this too — when we are *tsodkim* in both senses of the word. Genuinely right, and genuinely righteous. When we must stand firm, and fight if necessary, and not apologize for it.

The Torah says *tzedek, tzedek tirdof* — justice, justice, pursue. The word is repeated. One reading teaches that the first *tzedek* is about the destination. The second is about the road to get there. Pursue justice — AND pursue it justly. You can be right about what needs to happen, and still be wrong about how you go about it. Or you can take hold of the tools of justice and deploy them in working toward an unjust outcome.

So the question is not whether to have commitments. It's what we do with them. And whether we are pursuing justice, or just certainty.

Amichai's poem does not end with flourishing regrowth - it ends:

And a whisper will be heard in the place where the house once stood, now in ruin.

וְלִחְיֹשֶׁה תִּשְׁמָע בַּמָּקוֹם שֶׁבּו הָיָה הַבַּיִת
אֲשֶׁר נִהָרַב

The house lies in ruins. But the plow and the mole have loosened the earth - and there is just the barest whisper of new growth.

In a world where everything is loud - the news, the arguments, the outrage - all stoked by social media that profits from keeping us at each other's throats; Amichai says that the most important sound may be a whisper.

What whispers can we open ourselves to this year - what places of growth and openness, in ourselves, and among ourselves? What might soften in the common ground between us if we allow connection and listening, love and doubt, to loosen the soil that has been packed rock-hard by everyone standing their ground?

Rebuilding takes time. And what is rebuilt is never the same as it was before. But it can be something new, if we let it.

And everything we can do to foster that process, in our own lives and in the public sphere - to listen and not just declare, to open doors to dialogue where we can do so safely - remembering that discomfort is not the same thing as danger - might be what's needed to invite others to do the same. We need so badly to cultivate the earth for something new to grow - between us, and within us.

Shanah Tovah.