

[Dear President Obama,](#)

Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to [my home]? Park in the driveway or on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him. In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English too, just like my friend Aoto from Japan.

Please tell him that his brother will be Alex who is a very kind boy, just like him. Since he won't bring toys and doesn't have toys Catherine will share her big blue stripy white bunny. And I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math. And he [can] smell Catherine's lip gloss penguin which is green. She doesn't let anyone touch it.

Thank you very much! I can't wait for you to come!

[Signed]
Alex
6 years old

Alex is a six year old boy from New York, who wrote to President Obama this year asking to take in Syrian refugee [Omran Daqneesh](#). Omran made the front page in countless newspapers across the world. You might remember the photo of Omran, covered in grey dust and soot, the left side of his little face crusted in blood, staring out blankly as he sits on an orange ambulance seat trying to comprehend the unspeakable violence he just fell victim to. The image captivated the world....but only for a moment.

Omran quickly faded, and Syria and its refugees once again became a faceless political debate that everyone had an opinion about. Should we help the refugees? Should we keep them out? Should we let them in only after extreme vetting? Should our military get involved in Syria or should we keep our troops away? And in the hysteria of talking over each other, we forgot the problem.

Except six year old Alex. Six year old Alex saw a boy who needed help. Alex recognized the differences between he and Omran- different ethnicity, different language, different religion. Omran probably needed math help and won't come with any toys - but Alex didn't care about any of that. His most basic instinct was to see Omran as a human.

Most of us struggle with that - seeing the humanity in everyone. It's so easy to reduce people into binary categories. Looks like me. Doesn't look like me. Agrees with me. Disagrees with me. Conservative. Liberal.

But these labels reduce complexity, diminish nuance and shut down earnest dialogue.

All of which are counter to our Jewish tradition, a tradition built on debate and disagreement.

The Talmud is a big, long record of Jewish disagreement. It is 63 tractates and thousands of pages of discussion on different doctrines and laws and records prevailing **and** opposing opinions. The Talmud takes [7.5 years to get through if you read one page a day](#). And Jews have been studying the many sides of these arguments for over 1000 years, in an earnest effort to reach truth.

Throughout the Talmud, the most recognizable disagreements happen between two famous houses of thought: the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. The Talmud makes a point to illustrate the relationship between the two:

“Although Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed,” the Talmud says, “Beit Shammai did not abstain from marrying women of the families of Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying those of Beit Shammai. This is to teach you that they showed love and friendship towards one another, thus putting into practice the scriptural text from Zechariah (8:16), “Love ye truth and peace.” (Eruvin 13b)

The object of disagreement in the Talmud is to reach the truth. When the rabbis and their students were debating and creating new solutions to problems, their goal wasn't to be correct. Their collective goal was to reach the correct answer. This took immense energy, creativity, and patience. In their minds, there were tremendous consequences to getting it right.

Since Reform Judaism's emergence in the 18th century, we have largely shed this tradition. As a tradition that does not find Jewish law binding, the Talmud has been relegated to synagogue library shelves, seldom studied. But with this shift, we have abandoned the organized, respectful debate that was built into our Jewish education system. And the pendulum has swung away from seeking answers as a religious community towards a more individualized approach to Judaism, in which we do what is comfortable for us personally.

This phenomenon has also happened in our political system. In the 19th century, similar energy, creativity and patience were invested in political debating. The most famous of these debates happened in [1858 between the then-unknown Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas](#) during their run for the Senate. In each of the seven debates, either Douglas or Lincoln would open with an hour long address - 60 minutes of uninterrupted speech. Then the other would respond for an hour and a half. And the debate would conclude with a 30 minute rebuttal from the first speaker.

Audiences would stand in the summer sun, for over three hours, to listen to *Senate candidates* debate issues of national importance.

But, in 1960, the country's debate structure changed permanently, with the first televised presidential debate starring John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon.

This first debate garnered mixed reviews from the public. The country's reaction depended, in large part, upon whether they watched on TV, or only listened on the radio. Radio listeners thought Nixon won, but people who watched the debate on TV thought Kennedy won.

The televised debate received great scrutiny from pundits. One journalist called it "[a puny contribution, capsulized, homogenized, perhaps dangerous in its future implication.](#)" A historian responded, agreeing that, "The present formula of TV debate is designed to corrupt the public judgment and, eventually, the whole political process. The American Presidency is too great an office to be subjected to the indignity of this technique."

And here we are, 56 years after the first televised debate, subjected to the indignity of televised debate, our society more polarized than ever.

Since the turn of the century, the rise of smartphones, Amazon Prime, and On Demand television have fostered a of instant gratification. You want it? You can have it - with free two-day shipping. And this instant materialism has overflowed into instant ideology.

News that you agree with? We have channels running 24 hours a day that preach to your, personal choir!

Facebook? They have designed algorithms that prioritize articles and friends you agree with! And if you don't like what you see - unfriend! Unfollow!.

Twitter? All you need to know about a subject in 140 characters.

But if we take a step back....what have we done to ourselves? What have we done to our society?

We have come to exist in echo chambers - personalized bubbles that tell us what we want to hear, show us our friends with whom we agree, and keep out dissenting opinions and different perspectives of the world. And anybody that stands in our way, disagrees, or thinks differently - we unfollow them or worse, kick them out of the bubble entirely.

This year, the Pew Research Institute did a [study](#) on societal and political polarization in our country.

70% of Democrats think Republicans are closed minded and 86% view the Republican party unfavorably.

Over half of Republicans think Democrats are closed minded and 91% view the Democratic party unfavorably.

And perhaps the most disconcerting statistic is the growing trend in each party to view the other as a threat to the nation's well being. ([Pew](#))

And these views have created what the Pew study calls Ideological silos. These aren't just political issues. Liberals and conservatives disagree about where they want to live, the kind of people they want to live near, and even who they would welcome into their families.

But there is one thing that affects how Americans view the opposing party: friendship. For both Democrats and Republicans, those with few or no friends in the other party are more likely to have very negative feelings about the people in that party.

So I want to offer a few steps for reaching across the political aisle and building relationships of mutual respect with family members, friends, and co-workers with whom we may disagree. Like six year old Alex, this wisdom comes from a kid. [The Kid President](#). (If you're not familiar, he is a YouTube star.)

Step 1: Treat people like they're people, people...In a heated argument, you can forget that you're talking to a person, a human being, someone with a heart beat."

Jewish tradition teaches, "Olam hesed yibaneh," that the world is built on chesed, on loving kindness. We stand no chance as a country, if we cannot approach political debate and disagreement with love, with kindness, with respect. It is our job to build the world with love.

Step 2 - Listen, listen, listen...even if what they're saying does not make sense. That's part of treating them like a person. You have to hear them out.

In our tradition, The Shema declares hearing a sacred act. Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad. 'Hear O' Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one.'

The Shema teaches that listening is the conduit to internalizing the Oneness of God. Even more so, listening is the conduit to internalizing the oneness of humanity.

Step 3 - Pause. Breathe. Love. It's ok to disagree. It's not okay to be mean. Don't say it, until you can say it with love...You don't have to see eye to eye to work shoulder to shoulder.

Our Torah teaches to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). How would you want to be treated by a neighbor that disagreed with you?

Step 4 - Acceptance. Here's something you have to accept. Not everybody's the same and that's a good thing. We need variety. We just got to learn to be more awesome to each other. Nobody wins when all you want to do is win. We got a whole world to make more awesome.

Our Torah explains the diversity of the world through the [Tower of Babel story](#). One commentary on that story teaches, “Uniformity of thought is not a sign of freedom but its opposite.” ([Rabbi Sacks](#))

This commentary literally teaches that our freedom demands diversity and dissension.

It is so easy to conflate people with the candidates they support or the political party they identify with. But we must remember: People who support candidates ARE NOT the candidates themselves. People are far more nuanced than simply their political affiliations.

This year, more than ever, is a time to reach our hands across the ideological aisle with respect, with love, with kindness.

Deuteronomy teaches ["Humans are trees of the field." A Chassidic teaching explains the verse further, saying "If a tree grows in isolation it is likely to become crooked and bent.](#) However, trees that grow together in a forest grow straight and tall.

In isolation, in echo chambers, in ideological silos, we grow crooked and bent. But with earnest, respectful debate and discussion, approaching people like their people - with love and kindness - humanity will grow straight and tall together.

Between now and next Rosh Hashana, our nation, our society could become even more polarized. But we as individuals have immense power to build bridges and heal the wounds of our nation.

In the coming year,

Challenge yourself to see the humanity in everyone - like 6 year old Alex.

Challenge yourself to engage in complex debates, seeking truth communally instead of being right individually - as the Talmud teaches us.

Challenge yourself to step outside your news and social media echo chamber and purposefully expose yourself to viewpoints different than your own.

Challenge yourself to build friendships with people who reside outside of your ideological silo.

Challenge yourself to embrace the diversity of this incredible country, while also recognizing the disparate experiences that shape that very diversity.

Challenge yourself to listen, pause, breathe, and love.

I'd like everyone to turn to page 17, to where we started our Yom Kippur journey together at Kol Nidre.

“In its emphasis on humility, Kol Nidre provides a corrective to the toxic certainties of polarized discourse. What if we approached each other with the humility to recognize that our most confident convictions will always be qualified by the limits of our own knowledge and understanding? In its haunting melody and strangely legalistic language, we begin to sense the

twilight truth: our high horses to often stumble and our soapboxes stand on shaky ground. Kol Nidre grants us the gift of sacred uncertainty: the chance to begin this new year with a sense of what we do not know, rather than the narrow certainty about what we do. It's what Buddhists call "beginner's mind." What if every time I were ready to proclaim some self-evident truth, I allowed Kol Nidre to whisper in my ear, "Says who?" (Rabbi David Stern)

And now, let's look at the end of our journey on page 661, that we come to later this afternoon that concludes Yom Kippur looking forward.

"Our sages teach:

As soon as the fast of Yom Kippur concludes,
Pound the first nail into the sukkah!

To everything there is a season -
A time for prayer and looking inward,
A time to go outside and build.

So it is written:

"One Mitzvah inspires another."
May this long day of fasting and self denial
Inspire acts of creativity, generosity, and joy.
May we go from strength to strength.

As this day has been a refuge for the spirit,
May we shelter one another in the sukkah.
As we have shared worship and *t'shuva*
May we share hospitality and friendship in the days to come.
Mindful that our days are fleeting,
We prepare to taste the sweet fruits of this season;
To cherish life, to celebrate the light."
(Mishkan HaNefesh)

May our Yom Kippur journey together lead to a year of healing for our country, to a year of hospitality and friendship, building bridges and increasing dialogue. May we all focus on the oneness of our nation, cherishing life, and celebrating light.

G'mar Chatimah Tova.