

In a Pandemic of Certainty, We Need More Curiosity

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

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Raise your hand if you're always right.

Raise your hand if you *know* someone who's always right.

Raise your hand if you're *sitting* with someone who's always right. (No, just kidding. Don't raise your hand.)

We all know how irritating it can be when someone always thinks they're right. None of us wants to be that person.

But this begs the question: how open, really, are we to being wrong?

Somehow, it seems to me, when it comes to matters of consequence—like politics, or raising children, or running an organization, or navigating Covid, or family dynamics—*our* opinion is always the *right* one.

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On Rosh Hashanah, I talked about how living spiritually is about *believing* that you can become a better version of yourself, and taking a hard look at who you are, and making the uncomfortable changes so you can be the person you want to be.

It's something I've learned from my own experience.

For much of my life, *I* was that person who thinks he's always right.

You can ask my family and my friends and people I've worked with. They'll tell you.

I don't mind admitting this to you because, as I said last week, all of us are always works in progress.

It may feel good to be right all the time, but it's not a good way to be—and it's definitely not a good way to grow as a human being.

I used to think certainty was a sign of strength and principled decision-making. But I understand now that it's actually the opposite.

I've come to see that certainty is rooted in narrow-mindedness and a narrow view of the world.

It leads to self-righteousness, and echo chambers, and obstinance, and the impulse to flex our power over others because, well...they're wrong.

Sadly, I believe our society today is under attack by another pandemic—one as dangerous to our social, intellectual, and cultural wellbeing as Covid has been to our physical wellbeing.

And that is, the pandemic of *certainty*.

It has infected every sphere of life, and it's eating away at our families and our homes, our friendships, our workplaces, and our public square.

And if we don't find a way to treat it soon, it just may destroy us.

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You may have read the articles in the last couple weeks about the stunning rise in books being banned by American school districts and public libraries.

According to these reports, more than 2,500 book bans were enacted around the country in the last year, resulting in nearly 1,650 different books being pulled from the shelves.

That's an increase of more than 50 percent over the previous year, and it's part of a growing trend as our country has become more polarized.

Many of these books deal with issues like LGBTQ, gender identity, and racism.

You may also remember that school district in Tennessee that banned the Holocaust memoir *Maus*.

And it's not only *books* that are being banned.

Just the other day, a Jewish publication reported that the law school at UC Berkeley has given campus groups permission to bar speakers that support Israel or Zionism.

This is just the latest incident in a years-long pattern of speakers being disinvited from college campuses for expressing views that dissent from certain accepted orthodoxies.

And, perhaps not coincidentally in this environment, the author Salman Rushdie—whom, back in 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini condemned to execution because of his book on Islam—was attacked on stage while giving a presentation here in New York State.

To my mind, censorship of this nature is an example of the “certainty pandemic” at work.

It says: “These books and speakers challenge *our way*—the *right way*—of seeing things, so they are a threat.

“If people are exposed to them, *they* might start thinking the wrong way, too.

“So, we need to do whatever we can to stop that from happening. And the ends justify the means.”

Certainty is rooted in fear, and it leads to abuses of power.

And the end result, when it's taken to the extreme, is the destruction of ideas, the suppression of dissenting voices, and the narrowing of the mind and of the world in the name of upholding that which those with social or institutional power *know*, without a doubt, is *right*.

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This is not the Jewish way.

In fact, I believe that Judaism offers the *antidote* to our pandemic of certainty.

If you're familiar at all with the Talmud—or if you've heard someone talk about it—you might know that it records the debates and discussions of the Sages, often without even giving a final answer.

And it records *all* their various conflicting opinions for us to study, not just the majority view.

In this way, the Talmud teaches us how to think *pluralistically*—meaning: to approach life *knowing* that there are many different ways of thinking and doing in this world, and that there's something to be learned from *everyone*—even and especially those with whom we disagree.

But there's even more to it than that.

Barry Wimpfheimer, a Talmud professor at Northwestern University, has discovered something profound about the Jewish way of thinking in the Talmud that I think can really help us.

Jewish tradition says God gave the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai, and Moses passed it on down the line ultimately to the Sages.

So, on the one hand, the Sages believed they were in possession of God's own truth. And as leaders of the community, they made rules for the people with confidence that they were right.

But on the other hand, says Professor Wimpfheimer, the Sages were deeply uncertain about being so certain.

Because, quite frequently, when they state some rule or interpretation with definitive confidence, they immediately go about questioning it, and taking it apart, and pointing out all the problems with what they had just said with such certainty the moment before.

In our modern secular culture, which *venerates* certainty, we might call this second-guessing, indecisive, weak.

But our Sages understood that truth doesn't come from simply declaring it to be so.

So, they *think*. And listen. And *revise*. And think again.

They admit their own knowledge is *limited*, so they believe no answer is ever final, and they strive constantly for a better understanding.

In doing so, they teach us that it's *certainty*—and *not* dissent or disagreement—that can have disastrous consequences.

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So *skeptical* are they of certainty that they choose a *radically different* approach—one that is so poorly lacking in our own modern culture: they choose *curiosity*.

—Where certainty admits no possibility of being *wrong*, curiosity is driven by the belief that, no matter how much you know, you are never fully *right*.

—Where certainty is rooted in arrogance and bravado, curiosity is rooted in humility and a genuine desire to *understand*.

—Where certainty breeds contempt and coarseness toward people who hold opinions that are (quote) “wrong,” curiosity breeds *respect for*, and *interest in*, those who offer different ways of thinking.

—Certainty is binary and simplistic—right or wrong, good or bad—but curiosity is sophisticated and nuanced, because curious people understand it's possible to listen and learn without agreeing or endorsing.

—People who are *certain* think they already know all they need to know about how other people see things. But people who are *curious* are driven by the angst of not knowing *enough*.

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Now, all of this begs the inevitable question:

What about people whose views are so obviously antithetical to our most deeply held values?

Is there really a point in talking to people like *that*?

In answer to this, I'd like to tell you about my friend Nate, who's the most shining exemplar of curiosity I know.

Nate is the executive director of Temple Israel in Omaha, Nebraska, where I used to be the rabbi.

A few years ago, Temple Israel's building was defaced by antisemitic propaganda. The security cameras caught the guy in the act and the police arrested him and were ready to press charges.

But Nate had an unusual request: he wanted to sit down with the guy for a beer first...

just to talk to him, find out why he did it, let him meet a real Jew, and maybe see if he could answer any questions the guy had about us.

And this young man, whose name is Jonathan, agreed to meet with him.

So, they had a beer together and talked.

Nate asked Jonathan why he did it. How did he get involved with this neo-Nazi group?

And Jonathan told him. And he told Nate things he'd heard about Jews.

And Nate listened to him respectfully, and answered his questions, and explained why his impressions were inaccurate.

And as they talked, the two men—a Jew and a neo-Nazi—discovered they actually had some things in common.

Now, they obviously saw *many* things very differently.

But they were both about the same age, they both liked to play video games, they both had baby daughters who were their pride and joy, and they were both just trying to figure out how to be good fathers.

But Jonathan was struggling. And he told Nate he appreciated his kindness in giving him this opportunity to talk.

Nate and Jonathan actually got together a couple more times after that and even texted occasionally.

One day, Nate got an email from Jonathan's parents, pouring out their hearts to him about their son and thanking him for being so compassionate toward him.

And then sometime not too long after that, Jonathan told Nate he wanted to apologize to Temple Israel for what he'd done.

So, he recorded an apology video, and we played it at Friday night services on the big screen in our sanctuary.

Nate had opened the door to this man knowing nothing about him except that he had vandalized our building with a hateful poster.

He wanted to sit down with Jonathan *not* because Nate was open to becoming a neo-Nazi, but because he saw Jonathan as a human being, and he knew that human beings are complex, and everyone has a story, and we can gain a greater understanding of people and of ourselves and of the world by *listening* and treating each other with *dignity*.

And we can even make a difference for the good in someone's life, just by being curious.

Nate did something no one else I know has ever done. He's a unique guy and I'm proud to call him my friend.

And one thing I've learned from him is this:

Certainty is the refuge of the faint-hearted.

But curiosity requires *courage*—the courage to treat all people with respect even if they don't do the same in return, the courage to *really listen* to people and ideas you don't agree with, and the courage to be *changed* by our encounters—even with the most unlikely people.

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I tell you this story *not* because I expect all of *us* to be like Nate. I don't.

I'm telling you because—let's face it—99 percent or more of the people we clash with in our daily lives over politics or anything else—our friends, our co-workers, our parents, our children, our siblings, our neighbors, even the crazy cousin at break-the-fast—are *not* Nazis.

They may see things differently than we do, but they're normal human beings who deserve to be treated with kindness and respect.

And we just might learn something if only we would be curious instead of certain that there's nothing to be gained.

If my friend Nate can do this with an *actual Nazi*, well then, we should be able to do it with the people we know.

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Even if it doesn't come naturally to us, we *can* make the effort to *become* more curious.

It's about being humble and open-minded;

Choosing to *engage* with conflicting views, rather than shut them down;

Being skeptical of certainty, even when it comes to things we feel most certain about;

And reaching beyond our narrow little place where it's comfortable, and searching for more *expansiveness* in places where people and ideas are unfamiliar.

That's the Jewish way. It's one of Judaism's gifts to the world.

And it's something the world badly needs right now.

It's my hope that, at Temple Beth-El, we can nurture curiosity, pluralism, and open-mindedness as *ways of being* in all our relationships and in every area of our lives.

In my view, this is how we can do our part to help combat the pandemic of certainty that is eroding so much of what we hold dear.

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To close, I'd like to share a poem by Yehudah Amichai, who fought in Israel's War of Independence and devoted his life to peace and reconciliation.

It's called "The Place Where We are Right."

From the place where we are right
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 a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.