There's a skit I love from the old sketch comedy series, "Monty Python's Flying Circus." (If you've never heard of Monty Python, all you have to do is ask the nerdiest white guy you know. He will tell you *all* about them.)

This particular sketch starred Michael Palin, Graham Chapman, and John Cleese. As the scene opens, a bespectacled Michael Palin walks up to a receptionist in a nondescript office and says, "I'd like to have an argument please."

The receptionist sends him down the hall, and Palin dutifully enters the designated room.

But, almost immediately, Graham Chapman begins shouting a series of epithets at Palin from behind his desk — topping it off with "snotty-faced heap of parrot droppings."

Seems there's been some sort of error. Sure enough, Palin has, mistakenly, walked into the office labeled not *Argument*, but *Abuse*.

Extricating himself from the *Abuse* office, Palin reaches his intended destination, the *Argument* office.

But upon sitting down, he finds himself in an equally unsatisfying exchange with John Cleese. Instead of building an argument on facts and evidence, Cleese simply contradicts everything Palin says.

Exasperated, Palin cries, "I came in here for a good argument!"

"No you didn't," replies Cleese.

"You came in here for an *argument*."

Everyone in this room, at one time or another, has had an argument. Some of us argue only reluctantly. For others (perhaps those of us from New York?) arguing is as natural as breathing.

But for any of us who've had an argument we regret, or one that's gone south, or even one we've avoided, the circumstances under which we've argued offer an opportunity reflection during these holidays — and a critical opportunity for *teshuvah*.

To really get into the topic, let's go back in time — back even before the Talmud, *or* Monty Python. About 3300 years ago. One of my favorite little-known Torah narratives.

The star of this skit is not Michael Palin, but Moses. And Moses is having a bad day. He already knows he isn't going with the Israelites to the Promised Land. Instead, Joshua will be their leader.

And *aftselakhis*, here come the Reubenites and Gadites, two of the twelve tribes of Israel.

*Moses — we have something to tell you.*

Turns out not everyone is so excited about going into the Promised Land. The Reubenites and the Gadites, you see, are cattlemen. And where they are right now, land that is *not* in the Promised Land, is really good land for raising cattle —

Jewish cowboys. Who knew?

— "and, Moses," they say, "if it's all the same to you — we are very happy staying right here, thank you very much."

It is most definitely not all the same to Moses. In fact, Moses freaks out. For 10 straight verses.

I'll paraphrase.

"You're gonna send your *brothers* to fight? *Without you*? You guys are just like your fathers! You know I'm old enough to *remember* your fathers! They refused to listen to Joshua and Caleb *40 years ago* when we said it was time to go into the Promised Land! Because of them, we've had to wander around in the desert for 40 years! And now *here you come*, fancy big shots with your cattle and your cowboy hats!"

Friends, Moses is on a *roll*.

You… *tarbut anashim chata'im!*[1] he screams at the Reubenites and the Gadites. "You band of sinful men!"

[1] Numbers 32:14

Depending on your point of view, being called "sinful" might not be as bad as being called a "snotty-faced heap of parrot droppings."

But you have to wonder if the Reubenites and the Gadites thought they walked into the wrong office. And instead of getting an argument from Moses, they got abuse.

But it's at this moment of crisis and pain, that the response of the Reubenites and the Gadites offers something powerful to teach.

After all that yelling? They don't storm off. They don't yell back. They don't answer insult with insult, abuse with abuse.

*Vayigshu*, the text says. They come near. They step up.

Now, they *don't* change their minds. The first words they say after Moses' rant is, "We will build here." Where we are.

And.

They also let Moses know, *we hear you*. Moses, we're gonna leave our flocks and our kids here, outside the Promised Land — but we'll send some of our best fighters with you.

But after everything is over, we'll come back here. OK?

In a world of rancor and stubbornness, in a world where people don't seem to know how to talk to each other — from six-year-olds to Senators, from the trolley to the teeter-totter to Twitter (or whatever it's called today) — these two tribes offer wisdom. Moses had come in hot, ready to throw down. Things could have escalated quickly. But the two tribes don't yell in response to yelling. They respond to chaos with clarity. They offer kindness. They set boundaries. They show respect.

And it works. Moses says OK.

How'd they do it?

How do *we* do it?

I see three insights from this moment of Torah that can guide us when we find ourselves in an argument.

First — the tribes know who they are. They know what they want. And they don't hide it. They don't closet themselves. I think it's this self-assuredness that enables them to speak with conviction, not confrontation.

Sometimes, people shout the loudest are the moments in which they lack that grounding. With chaos and discord all around, we are rattled and often insecure about our *own* identity or point-of-view. When Moses flies off the handle, the two tribes respond calmly, with a clear position and a clear purpose.

Second — they're not only honest with themselves, they're honest *with Moses*. The Reubenites and Gadites don't hide their feelings, or pretend to want something they don't. They do not bend or give in just because he's loud and dominant.

They don't fudge or fumpfer, change the subject or dodge the question. They don't pander or appease.

"We will build here."

Moses might think they're crazy to choose cattle over Canaan. We might agree. Or not.

It doesn't really matter.

That's who they are. No matter how stunned or disappointed Moses is, that doesn't change anything. They know who they are. They don't insist that Moses agree with them. But they're also not embarrassed to say what they want. They're clear. They're direct.

They don't want to live in the Promised Land. And they say so.

And third — though the Torah doesn't say so explicitly, they wait for the right time. *Operation Promised Land* was no secret, after all. Maybe they should have filed their complaints from the beginning? Staged a walkout?

But knowing Moses and the community deeply as they did, these tribes showed wisdom in their patience. They didn't force the issue at every moment, incessantly reminding everyone what their position was. They *minimized* argument at other times so that they could be calm and present when argument became necessary.

In their self-awareness, in their honesty, and in their patience, the Reubenites and Gadites show discernment, and respect for the godliness in themselves and in others. They don't offer anger for anger, abuse for abuse. They don't back down, but they don't punch back either.

*Vayigshu*. They come close. They step up. They *hear* Moses — even *through* his anger. They offer solutions, solutions that *show* that they heard him. Solutions that they know from their time spent listening will be received as helpful and not threatening.

Moses accepts their terms.

Of course, he still can't completely let go of his ranting.

If you help us out, and things work out, and then you return, you will be *naki'im*, "free of *sin*." But if not, you'll *sin* before God! And you should know… you'll be full of *sin*!

Oy, poor Moses can't help but make it about sin.

The Reubenites and Gadites don't take the bait. They patiently repeat the terms of the deal. *Our families and cattle will stay behind. The recruits will go with you. Just like you said*.

Yeah, they leave out the sin part.

But it's OK. Because they hear Moses. And their words *show* Moses that they hear him, repeating back to him the essence of what he said to them.

Today, we might call that "active listening." But in Torah, it's just a way to make peace when there's strife.

*[Question for pairs: What is something you enjoy talking about?]*

Argument itself isn't the problem. Jewish discourse, religious and otherwise, is rooted in debate. The very name of our people is Yisrael — "one who wrestles with God." We wrestle with each other just as we wrestle with God. A wrestling match is not a fistfight. It can be rollicking, invigorating, even playful.

Pundits sometimes like to blame our troubles on "tribalism," but note that the reconciliation is initiated by Reuben and Gad — two *actual* tribes. The

rabbis of the Talmud pick up on these wise tribal traditions. Perhaps you've heard of the two famous houses of study — *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai*, The "House of Hillel" and the "House of Shammai." They're *famous* for their arguments, some small and some, real barnburners.

These guys couldn't even agree about *Chanukah candles*. Shammai argued that, on the first night, we light not one but eight candles on the menorah, and take one away each successive night. Hillel, by contrast, said to light one candle on the first night, and add one light each night, until we reach eight on the eighth night — arguing "in matters of holiness, we increase."

You know who won.

It turns out, through pages and pages of Talmudic debate, in almost *every* argument, Beit Hillel wins.

Why? Well, we might assume that the students of the house of Hillel were smarter.

We would be wrong.

In tractate *Eruvin*, the Talmud explains that Beit Hillel always won "because Hillel's study house was kind and modest. It always taught about its own opinions, *and* the opinions of Beit Shammai. In fact, they mentioned the opinions of Beit Shammai *before* their own."[2]

They shared the words of their adversaries, *even though they disagreed with them*. They augmented the holiness not just in candles, but in their companions.

*That's* what makes the Reubenites and Gadites, and Beit Hillel after them, models for having a good argument.

A conversation in which everyone approaches it in a mindset in which, even if convictions aren't compatible, we listen *to understand*; we *remain curious*; we look to see the *godliness in the human beings*.

And by doing so, God willing, everyone walks away feeling heard.

[2] *Eruvin* 13b

This all comes through in the Hebrew word for "argument."

That word is *machloket*. *Machloket* comes from the word *chelek*. *Chelek* doesn't mean "side." It means "portion," or "share."

Like we pray in the Amidah *tein chelkeinu b'torahtecha*. "Give us our share in Your Torah."

If we all have a *chelek*, a "share" of Torah, we end up with a definition *not* in which "argument" means "fight." It's more like a "distribution," or "apportionment." In a *machloket*, I have a *chelek* and you have a *chelek*. I have a share of the truth, and you have a share of the truth.

We come closer to the whole truth when we bring our portions *together*.

What turns the unnamed leaders of the little-known tribes of Reuben and Gad into inspirational figures is that they live that knowledge and, in doing so, transform an argument that might have been tragically destructive into what the rabbis call in *Pirkei Avot* a *machloket l'shem Shamayim*.

"An argument for the sake of Heaven."

An argument *not* to score points or assert superiority, *not* to shout an adversary into submission or trick them into doing what you want them to do. An argument for a higher purpose. Bringing different viewpoints not into conflict, but into relationship. Not storming off, but coming close.

Sometimes this means not focusing on the places of disagreement. Remember how we saw that the Reubenites and Gadites ignored the insulting language Moses used, and instead focused on their places of agreement?

Some of us find that hard to do.

It's something I'm working on in my own teshuvah practice. For me, argument comes naturally. I believe they're often necessary. And while I strive to argue only for the sake of Heaven… let's just say I don't always show the wisdom of the Reubenites and the Gadites. On the contrary, my instinct is to bring up issues as I perceive them in real time, or continually return to places of disagreement to "work them out."

You can ask the people who love me — it doesn't always go well.

This year, I'm hoping the call of the shofar can remind argument-oriented, *persistent* people like me: sometimes it's good to shut up and listen… Instead of dwelling on places of discord, take a step back.

Is this the conversation we need to have right now?

Will it accomplish what I want it to accomplish?

What will be best for everyone in the long run?

*[Q: What is something you have a hard time talking about?]*

The *Avot* text, in full, says "any argument that is for the sake of Heaven, in the end will be sustained." Conversely, "any argument *not* for the sake of Heaven, in the end will *not* be sustained."

15th Century Italian rabbi Ovadia Bartinoro, reads that text and asks: What does it mean for an argument to be sustained?

"This is to teach," he answered, "that the *people* engaged in the conflict will be sustained, and will not be lost."

It's all about the people. If it's not — what are we even arguing for?

It's no great insight that this value is slipping away from us, that our discourse has coarsened. I don't think it's too controversial to say that the guy in the White House shares some of the blame for that — but that's not the only reason. Social media has succeeded in bringing great numbers of people together in communication — much in the same way that a demolition derby brings a great number of cars together.

Best to wear a helmet.

It's possible, right now, to break out your phone and engage in impassioned argument with a dozen people at once. Not with Gadites or Reubenites. With strangers. Without faces or sometimes real names. Ever had an argument with a screen name? A deep chat with "bananafishbones" or "bigcatenergy69"?

If not, let me advise you from experience —

*Don't do it.*

Imagine if Moses was arguing not with the Reubenites, face to face, but with "ReubenSandwich612," a social media account with an avatar of a jar of sauerkraut. Could they have come to an understanding, a heartfelt reconciliation? Seems unlikely.

If the tribes had never met Moses, or hadn't developed a foundation of peoplehood with Moses, it's likely this particular *machloket* would have turned out differently.

Jewish strength is in Jewish community, a community that loves each other across difference, even when it's painful. Not trying to overpower each other. But learning to live with each other.

After all, Jews have *never* been the biggest or strongest.

For so much of our history, we've *resisted* societies that replaced argument with abuse, that fetishized might and power. Instead, we've responded with Reubenites and Gadites, with Hillels and Shammais, with a corpus of teaching that insisted that, in an argument where we are respectful, and honorable, where your words are just as holy as my words, *we all prevail*.

A true *machloket l'Shem Shamayim*. An argument for the sake of Heaven, that endures to this day.

From a people that endures to this day.

Sustained not by domination and bombast, but by love, dignity, and respect.

At the times we agree.

At the times we don't.

At all times.

*[Q: What do you want to bring to hard conversations this year?]*