

Sermonette 2: On Jewish nature

The Jews' greatest contribution to history is dissatisfaction! We're a nation born to be discontented. Whatever exists we believe can be changed for the better. Shimon Peres

Look, we have existed for 4,000 years - 2,000 years in diaspora, in exile. Nobody in the Middle East speaks their original language but Israel. When we started 64 years ago, we were 650,000 people. So, you know, we are maybe swimming a little bit against the stream, but we continue to swim. Shimon Peres

One day Pappus bar Judah found Rabbi Akiva sitting in a public place teaching and studying Torah to a group of students. Fearing for the great Rabbi Akiva's life, Pappas asked the master, "Are you not afraid of the Roman government?"

Rabbi Akiva replied with a parable:

'Once, a fox was walking hungrily alongside a river looking for his next meal when he saw a group of beautifully fat fish swimming in schools just out of his reach.

The fox called out to the fish, 'What are you fleeing from?'

The fish answered, 'We're trying to avoid the nets that fishermen cast out to catch us.'

Slyly, the fox said, 'I know of another stream across the woods where there are no fishermen, and I would gladly carry you there so you can continue safely on your way.'

The fish weren't fooled by the sly fox and replied, 'Aren't you the one known as the cleverest of all the animals? You aren't so clever after all! If we're in danger here in the water, which is our home, how much more so would be in danger on your back and out of the water!'

'So it is with us,' Rabbi Akiva explained. 'If we're in danger when we sit and learn, teach and practice Torah, of which it is written "For that is your life and the length of your days," (Deuteronomy 30:20), how much worse off we will be if we neglect the Torah!'

Rabbi Akiva returned to his studies and teaching. (Babylonian Talmud Tractate Brachot 61b)

The most important thing in life is to dare. The most complicated thing in life is to be afraid. The smartest thing in the world is to try to be a moral person. Shimon Peres

You don't make peace with friends. You make it with very unsavory enemies. Shimon Peres

It's better to be controversial for the right reasons, than to be popular for the wrong reasons. Shimon Peres

We are partners with God in making the world a better place. It is

important for us and the world that we treat such a daring statement as if it

were the truth. Today is the day we annually review the books, as it were,

providing explanations for any irregularities – which could be either bad

investments or missed opportunities. Debating fearfully concerning whether

any one act of ours constitutes a bad investment or missed opportunity

makes it almost impossible to enjoy the things that are meant to be enjoyed, because of how much we exhaust ourselves through worry born of fear. When our choices are made as we keep the other person in mind, then we are less likely to have glaring irregularities in our books. Instead, the results of the annual audit might be that we learn from our Senior Partner new ways to be kind with each other.

I find the last two quotations I selected to be very important reminders of some historical truths. When battle takes place between friends or relatives, it is usually called a civil war. When battle takes place between people who have learned to hate each other we have fighting, killing or sabotage. To get beyond that requires efforts from both the top down and the bottom up to resolve to live together without choosing to kill each other, or use each other to commit suicide.

Judaism in its entirety was summarized by Hillel, “Do not treat another person the way you do not want to be treated.” Keeping to this often requires going against the flow – which may be one of the reasons that unanimous decisions are worrisome.