

There are moments when clear communication is crucial, even determining the world's fate.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks once shared this historical narrative about the Cuban Missile Crisis.

*During the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when the United States and the Soviet Union were on the brink of nuclear war. At the height of the crisis, as described by Robert McNamara in his film, The Fog of War, John F. Kennedy received two messages from the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. One was conciliatory, the other far more hawkish. Most of Kennedy's advisers believed that the second represented Khrushchev's real views and should be taken seriously.*

*However, one man offered a different perspective. Llewellyn Thompson Jr. had been American ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1957 to 1962 and had come to know the Russian president well. He had even spent a period of time living with Khrushchev and his wife. He told Kennedy that the conciliatory message sounded like Khrushchev's own personal view while the hawkish letter, which did not sound like him, had probably been written to appease the Russian generals.*

*Kennedy listened to Thompson and gave Khrushchev an opportunity to back down without losing face — and the result being that a potentially devastating war was averted. It is terrifying to imagine what might have happened had Thompson not been there to establish which was and which was not the real act of communication.*

The Irish playwright and writer George Bernard Shaw once said, “The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

Communication serves as the basis of community - both terms derive from the Latin word *communis*, meaning "shared by all or many."

In the Mishnaic text Wisdom of Our Sages, *Pirkei Avot*, Hananiah ben Teradion said: “If two sit together and there are words of Torah [spoken] between them, then the Shekhinah abides among them.”

When we refer to “Torah,” we do not exclusively mean the Five Books of Moses. Instead, the concept of Torah can refer to most topics that promote Jewish living and values. Therefore, when we sit together, speaking words connected with Jewish living and values, we have the opportunity to practice a sacred act in a holy moment. In other words, there is a way to discuss issues of the day through the lens of Torah. When we discuss relevant matters in a way that forgoes the mutual respect necessary to communicate productively, we also forgo the opportunity to participate in a sacred moment.

Much of the breakdown in our communication with family, friends, our community, and the broader world is due to this concept that the way we speak with one another is ineffective. Currently, we often speak in what is called the “echo chamber.” The echo chamber is when you talk with people virtually or in person who all agree with what you are saying. So, it is an affirming process that does not offer the opportunity to learn from others with differing opinions. It means that we are having entirely separate conversations.

By communicating this way, we support other people's viewpoints with which we agree and dismiss ideas that contradict our beliefs. Our Talmudic tradition urges us to approach this situation quite differently, utilizing the example of Hillel's study house vs. Shammai's study house.

Beith Shammai and Beit Hillel argued innumerable laws with one another, virtually always disagreeing with each other. Both opinions were essential and relevant, but the primary victor was Beit Hillel. How do we know that? Well, you will not find many "Shammais" on college campuses, but you will find many Hillels. Most clearly, this is found in the name of our synagogue, Beth Hillel Bnai Emunah. So why did Beit Hillel win most arguments? Was it because they were more knowledgeable? Was it because they were better debaters? No - Beit Hillel was the victor because they had a fascinating practice; whenever they proposed an answer to a Jewish legal question, they would first quote Beit Shammai's opinion. In other words, they would present the contradiction before presenting their argument to learn from another perspective and honor those with whom they disagreed.

In this week's Torah Portion, Parashat Korach, we recognize that the Bible offers an essential perspective on the nature of relationships and the importance of communication.

Leading up to this parsha, Moses and his brother Aaron led the Jewish tribes from slavery in Egypt through the dangers of the wilderness to a place where they could prepare to finish their journey to the Promised Land. They are relatively comfortable.

Amid this current status, Korach raises a rebellion against Moses' and Aaron's leadership with this powerful verse: "All the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?"

Essentially, Korach challenges the status quo and argues with Moses and Aaron about their access to power.

This dynamic is the subject of volumes of commentary. One interpretation is that Korach and his followers limit the relationship between them and the Israelites' leadership. They essentially say: "It is our way or the highway." There is no conversation - no effort for reconciliation.

Whereas Moses reaches out to the followers of Korach, Datan and Aviram and asks to meet with them. Of course, they deny this request and continue with their rebellion.

When striving to build a community based on values and decency, seeing those with different perspectives as adversaries can be tempting. However, the Jewish tradition encourages us to look beyond this black-and-white mindset and consider the gray areas, learning from differing viewpoints, including those that contradict our own.

This is an age with a substantial breakdown in communication, so it is essential to try to hear other people's viewpoints and engage in a dialogue that lifts one another rather than seeks to defeat the other.

Miscommunication impacts our family, friends, community, and the broader world. We can endeavor to be like the House of Hillel, listening openly, considering carefully, and honoring one another, especially when disagreeing.