

YOM KIPPUR

Being Wrong

Reverend Rob Schenk is an evangelical minister who was on the front lines of the abortion debate during the eighties and nineties. As a staunch opponent of abortion, Reverend Schenk had close ties to both the religious right and to many socially conservative politicians. He had fought not only against abortion but also for the inclusion of the ten commandments in courtrooms and against equal rights amendments to state constitutions that would grant equality to the LGBTQ+ community.

Most members of Reverend Schenk's church support gun rights with no restrictions. But something happened to Reverend Schenk, and in 2010, he realized how wrong his church was. He became an ardent champion of gun violence prevention and legislation.

The 2015 documentary film *Armor of Light* tells his story, in which he comes to terms with how he was wrong about guns. In the documentary, Reverend Schenk travels around the country speaking to evangelicals - trying to understand how they could call themselves pro-life while opposing all restrictions on who can own a gun.

Guns—like so many other issues in our nation—are viewed through a partisan lens – if you're on the left, you must be wholly against them – if you're on the right, you must oppose any restriction on who can own them.

It has become a standard of our political dialogue – candidates for political office are expected to follow a particular set of views – even when they disagree, they must be careful not to say anything that would run counter to the partisan norms.

We are fed this partisanship by our media – try to spend one day listening to different channels. You will start to think that there are two different realities. And if you're part of one world, you **MUST** dislike the other – the other view is not only wrong, it is **morally repugnant**.

Of course, social media is coded in such ways as to protect these polarized views. The social media posts that we scroll through every day aim to legitimize whatever it is we are currently thinking – to tell us that we are right and that the other side is always wrong.

Our social media companies understand that having our opinions defended makes us feel good. It leads us to spend more time on social media, more time looking at advertising.

And so, you see, we are caught in a loop in which polarization is endless.

This has created a nation where extremes are embraced – where the middle-ground is seen as weak and valueless, where no one can admit when they're wrong.

Gone in our nation are moderates from either political party or in many ways, from any walk of American life.

It was May 24th of this year. I was in my car, and I turned on the radio to hear about yet another school shooting—this time at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. At first, the news reports claimed that there were two dead. And then, just moments later, I learned the number was twenty-one with nineteen being elementary-aged children. The news-reporter on the radio couldn't even speak – she was so full of distress that she couldn't even say the number.

In hearing that number and the very word ‘children’, my gut hurt – my stomach was in pain and I found that I couldn’t breathe. I pulled over and I sat in my car.

At that moment, I remembered bringing my own children to the bus stop for the first time – standing with them and waiting as they were nervous. I remembered seeing them get on the bus and wave back to me – they trusted that Shara and I were sending them somewhere safe, that we would be back home when school ended, that we would never put them in harm’s way.

When we hear about these school shootings -- it literally hurts inside of us – the thought of children in their school being murdered – it pains us – it torments us –

But it has happened again and again – Columbine, Sandy Hook, Aurora, Virginia Tech, Robb Elementary...So much carnage and so much death – all from guns in the hands of dangerous people.

But still – gun violence protection has become like so many other parts of our lives, a partisan issue – an issue that we are told that we need to be divided about – an issue that must remain partisan.

If there is anything in our world that should never be partisan, is it not the lives of children?

Our tradition encourages debate – it encourages meaningful argumentation where different sides offer different opinions.

Open a page of Talmud and you will see a whole slew of arguments between different sages – often, these arguments never even result in

a clear answer – the rabbis conclude by saying the word *TEIKU*, which literally means, Who Knows?!?

The point is not just the final answer but rather the process – the conversation – you see, there is a deep sanctity to the idea that we can learn from one another – that our views can be flexible and that they can change because we hear other opinions and sides – because we are open to the possibility that we are wrong.

There is a legend of a rabbi named Yochanan.

His debate partner, with whom he sparred with and argued with suddenly died. Yochanan was inconsolable and couldn't take care of himself. Eventually, another rabbi came in and every time Yochanan brought up a point – this rabbi said, “There is actually a rabbinic statement that supports you.” Again and again, when Yochanan spoke about anything, the new rabbi would find a statement that agreed with him.

Finally, Yochanan broke down and said, “Do you think you are my old debate partner? When I spoke, he would raise twenty-four objections, which led to a fuller understanding. All you do is tell me there is a teaching which supports me.” (B.M. 84a)

As this story makes clear, we need to surround ourselves and be open to hear other sides and see other views – because that's how we grow – that's how we evolve and get closer to truth

We are wired to defend that which we already believe – we are wired to look only at our own viewpoints and at our own opinions. If we don't surround ourselves with other views, if we don't entertain the possibility that we are wrong, we get stuck.

Some of you might have heard a rumor that I was a Cleveland sports fan. It's true – I care a little bit about Cleveland sports. I talk about it just a little bit. And I know I've made all of you sick to death hearing about it – *but humor me for a moment. This is a new take on my fandom.*

My grandfather used to take my father to Cleveland Indians games. It was a big part of my father's childhood, and when he became a dad, he took my brother and I to games as well. I have such fond memories of being at those baseball games with my dad and my brother and rooting together for the Tribe.

In college, I wore my Cleveland Indians hat everywhere and on it, there was a large picture of the Indian's mascot – Chief Wahoo. Chief Wahoo was a native American character with red skin and large white teeth who wore a band of feathers on his head. To think that this character was not offensive is to be at the very least naïve. Imagine a team called the NY Jews and the mascot was a cartoon smiling Rabbi with big huge teeth and a yarmulke and payas. This was the equivalent. Chief Wahoo was and is a racist mascot.

But in college, I wore it with pride – completely oblivious to the idea that there was anything wrong with a huge red-faced smiling mascot named Chief Wahoo.

In my senior year, I had a sociology professor who stopped me and said, "Brian, are you sure to wear that hat at Brandeis University?"

I took my hat off for the class, but immediately after, I put it back on – my pride in a Cleveland baseball team somehow trumped my ability to admit that the mascot and the team name was racist and wrong.

I was wrong to wear that hat and I was wrong to support a team with the name Indians. Not only was I wrong – but the entire city of Cleveland was wrong.

And we were wrong for a really long time. It wasn't until 2018 that Chief Wahoo was retired. And it wasn't until last year that the Cleveland Indians finally changed their team name to the Guardians.

You see, we are wired –I am wired—to defend our views and to never give in to this idea that we could be wrong. We feel that being wrong is somehow akin to being weak and valueless.

But being wrong is what makes us human and ultimately, being open to the idea that we might be wrong and yes, admitting when we are, well that is what enables us to make our world a better place.

Our partisan polarized world never accepts this idea of being wrong – we have our positions and they are never to be critiqued or criticized – they are the core defining characteristics of who we are and to question them, to go back on them – that would be a character weakness.

Remember when Senator John Kerry was attacked for flipflopping on the Iraq War. He voted for it, before he voted against it? We scolded him for admitting that he was wrong – how dare he not always have the very same position?!?

This is precisely why we have done nothing for so long on gun violence protection. We've stayed in our corners and we've defended our views instead of asking ourselves honestly – what can we do to end this carnage?

Instead of even trying to answer that question, we've been quick to blame the other side for politicizing a tragedy – instead of coming together and thinking about real legislative and community-wide solutions, we've defended our prior opinions literally to the death --

You may wonder how Reverend Rob Schenk came to the conclusion that evangelicals were so wrong on guns.

Schenk had been working on the abortion issue for years, and in defending his views, he'd spoken out against abortion clinics and abortion providers – calling them murderers and using provocative language to make his case.

And then one day, Reverend Schenk read in the news how two of the abortion clinic doctors he had spoken out against had been murdered by anti-abortion advocates. Schenk was tortured by the news and he met with the families and he listened to them.

And he started to ask himself – am I responsible for this? Is my polarizing rhetoric responsible for this?

And then as Rob Schenk continued to see gun violence erupt again and again in our nation, as he met the families of children who were murdered with guns, he realized how partisanship and polarization were destroying any chance we have to save lives.

Reverend Rob Schenk, an evangelical pro-life Christian, realized that the partisan stronghold on our national dialogue has become poisonous., it has disallowed us to have any real conversations, to understand one another, to see other viewpoints and positions – it has made it impossible for us to ever to admit when we are wrong.

How many people in this room know someone who digs their heels in on everything – who is unwilling to ever entertain the possibility that they might be wrong about something? How many times have you been that person – so afraid to admit that maybe, just maybe, you made a mistake, that your position is flawed?

I am hopeful on the gun issue – last June, the President signed the first gun violence protection bill in a generation. The bill expands background check systems for those under 21, it sets aside millions of dollars for mental health and drug courts and carries out red flag laws that allow authorities to temporarily confiscate guns from people who should not possess them. The legislation is bi-partisan and while it is most certainly a small step forward, it does reflect a willingness amongst some to finally do something.

But I'm also very nervous – for I know how powerful the idea of needing to be right is – the idea that we need to defend our views to the end—this attitude which dominates our world today, has organized us into these partisan and polarized extremes where there is no such thing as cooperation and no such thing as compromise –

Consider what this day is all about, this day of atonement...

We come here to this sanctuary on this day of atonement to admit our wrongs, to recognize that we have made mistakes and that we are not always right—we come here because we acknowledge that to be human is to err – we come here because we recognize that in seeing our flaws and in hearing other views, we have the sacred opportunity to make our world a better place.

This morning, we mourn those young lives lost in this gun pandemic; we vow to overcome differences, to admit when we are wrong and to make change here in NY and beyond. -Shanah Tovah.

