

HOW DO WE DISAGREE?

A GUIDED CONVERSATION



WELCOME

Before we begin, let's review the brit—the covenant—that animates our time together:

1. **Accountability:** I'll show up to our agreed-upon meetings. I'll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone's time.
2. **Presence:** When we're together, I'll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
3. **Double Confidentiality:** What I hear and say stays here. If I see another group member in a different context, I will not bring up anything they said here unless they do first.
4. **Vulnerability:** I'll stretch myself to be as open and honest as possible with my perspectives and experiences in order to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks as well.
5. **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
6. **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight:** I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to "solve their problem." No advice unless it's asked.
7. **Stepping Up & Stepping Back:** I understand that some of us are natural talkers while others are quieter. I'll pay attention to how much I am contributing, and will seek to balance how much I am talking with how much I'm listening.
8. **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of big questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
9. **Ownership:** This is our community to create. While we have guidelines and suggestions, it is ours to shape and form. We will get out of it what we put into it.

ASK & SHARE

Please take a moment to think of one person in your life whom you care about deeply, and with whom you deeply disagree. When we've all had a couple of minutes to reflect, you will be invited (but not required) to share a few words in answer to one of the following questions: "What do you admire about this person?" OR "What allows you to maintain a relationship with this person in the face of your disagreement?"

You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

LEARN

The following poem is by the modern Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai.
Take a minute to read it out loud, together:

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.

*"From the Place Where We are Right," The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai, ed. and trans.
Chana Block & Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).*

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- What does Amichai mean when he says that “the place where we are right is hard and trampled like a yard?”
- What about when he says that “doubts and loves dig up the world”?

Reflective Questions

- Amichai seems to suggest that in order for change to happen, we need to open up some space beyond our own opinions. How would we go about creating more “room” for such creativity to emerge? What keeps us from doing so?
- What is one concrete step you could take to open yourself up to the views of others?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

In Pirkei Avot, an ancient Jewish text that collects the advice of the sages, we read:

Torah is obtained with 48 things, and these are them: study, attentive listening, preparation of speech, understanding of the heart, intellect of the heart, reverence, awe, humility, happiness, purity, service of sages, care of friends, debate of the students, clarification, scripture, mishnah, minimization of merchandise, minimization of worldly occupation, minimization of pleasure, minimization of sleep, minimization of conversation, minimization of laughter, patience, generosity, trust of the sages, acceptance of afflictions, knowing one's place, gladness in one's portion, erection of a fence to one's words, lack of self-aggrandizement, being beloved, love of God, love of God's creatures, love of the righteous, love of the upright, love of rebuke, distancing from honor, lack of arrogance in learning, lack of joy in issuing legal decisions, lifting of a burden with one's friend, judging him with the benefit of the doubt, leading another to truth, leading another to peace, deliberation in study, questioning and responding, hearing and adding, learning in order to teach and learning in order to act, making one's master wiser, focusing one's teaching, saying [a thing] in the name of the one who said it.

Discussion Questions:

- What is it about these 48 things that lead one to Torah (understood here as Divine Truth)?
- What values does this text promote? Why are these qualities particularly important to the pursuit of Truth?
- Which of these qualities poses the greatest challenge for you?

Jewish legal tradition is quite serious about determining the “right” answer when it comes to Torah. But how are we to discern the truth if we are inundated with conflicting opinions? The Talmud instructs us as follows:

Lest a person say: “Now, how can I study Torah when it contains so many different opinions? The verse states that they are all “given from one shepherd.” One God created them, one leader gave them, the Master of all things uttered them . . . You, too, therefore, make your ears like a hopper and take in the words of those who forbid and the words of those who permit, the words of those who declare “ritually impure” and the words of those who render them “pure”; the statements of those who prohibit actions and the statements of those who permit them; the statements of those who deem items invalid and the statements of those who deem them valid.

--Chagiga 3b

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean to “make your ears like a hopper”?
- Does this text imply that all answers are equally true? Or simply that we need to listen to them?
- How do you imagine one is to decide whether something is “forbidden” or “permitted” in this scenario?
- Does adopting this outlook require a belief in God?
- How does this approach relate to the section of Pirkei Avot quoted above?

Hillel and Shammai were the heads of two competing schools of thought around the first century CE. They and their followers (referred to as “Beit Hillel” and “Beit Shammai”) often disagreed vehemently and came to opposite conclusions about essential matters of Jewish law.

However, our tradition says the following about these rival factions:

Although Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed, Beit Shammai did not, nevertheless abstain from marrying women of the families of Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying those of Beit Shammai. This is to teach you that they showed love and friendship towards one another. . . For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. [One group] said: “The law is in accordance with our opinion,” and the other said: “The law is in accordance with our opinion.” Ultimately a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: “Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the law is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.”

Since both these and those [opinions] are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the law established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the law they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai.

-- Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eruvin 13b

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean that both Hillel and Shammai’s arguments are “the words of the living God,” if Hillel prevailed?
- What do these texts suggest about how we should interact with those with whom we disagree?

DO

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life based on this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.

Portions of this guide were originally developed by Rabbi Nicole Auerbach for Central Synagogue.



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