

Disagreeing Better for the Sake of Heaven and Earth:  
Truth, Integrity, and Relational Disagreement

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During my second year of rabbinical school, I spent a year living in Jerusalem. One of my most impactful experiences that year was going on trips with Encounter, an educational organization committed to informed, courageous, and resilient Jewish communal leadership on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With Encounter, I traveled with other Jews to East Jerusalem and Bethlehem to meet with Palestinians and hear them speak about their lives, experiences, and hopes. One one program, Jews and Palestinians participated in the classic “Step in the Circle” icebreaker. The premise was simple - you should step in the circle if the statement being read applied to you. The statements started off innocuous enough - things like “I like music.” I was struck when many Palestinians and several Jews, including me, stepped into the circle when the leader said “I have grandparents who have been refugees.” Though we were born worlds apart, we still shared on key ancestral identity, and we began to learn to hold all of our realities as true.

I had learned the rabbinic principle *Eilu ve-Eilu Divrei Elohim Hayyim* - “both these and those are the words of the ever-living God” - before going on trips

with Encounter, but I don't think I understood it fully until that experience. And though I've invoked it at Or Atid before, I have some new insight I want to share:

*Eilu ve-Eilu Divrei Elohim Hayyim* is not a wishy-washy idea used to smooth over disagreement. It's not saying "agree to disagree." It means that multiple, seemingly conflicting truths can exist at the same time. It means that there can be multiple ways of reaching a goal or living out the same values. It means you can learn from listening carefully to things with which you deeply disagree.

The concept of *Eilu ve-eilu* comes from the Talmud, which tells a story about the schools of Hillel and Shammai, both of which asserted that the law aligned with their opposing views. A Divine voice emerged and proclaimed: “*Eilu ve-eilu divrei Elohim hayyim* - Both these and those are the words of the living God.’ However, the law is in accordance with the opinion of the House of Hillel.”

The Talmud asks, “if both these and those are the words of the living God, why was the law in accordance with the House of Hillel? 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 the House of Shammai.” (*Eiruvim* 13b)

It wasn't because Hillel was correct and Shammai was wrong! It was because of the school of Hillel's relational way of being: their equanimity, their humility, and their respect for their rivals.

The Talmud declares that the arguments between the schools of Hillel and Shammai were the example par excellence of a Jewish value called *Maḥloket Le-Shem Shamayim* - debate for the sake of heaven, illustrating that disagreement for the sake of progress can be valuable and productive.

Rabbinic tradition (the Meiri in his commentary on *Avot* Chapter 5) emphasizes that Hillel and Shammai would disagree with each other in order to understand the truth and not out of a desire to win. We have to stop trying to win. We have to start trying to understand each other and work together.

The challenge of navigating disagreements arises not only with political debates, but in so many areas of life. Having recently gotten back into following professional basketball, I noticed how heated some of the commentators can get. One basketball analyst, JJ Redick, originally predicted that the Celtics would win the NBA Finals, then said that he didn't think the Celtics could actually win it after game 5 of the series, but that he still stood by his prediction. Redick seemed to be contradicting himself, so his interlocutor Stephen A. Smith got agitated, demanding: how can you claim you're not changing your mind? Redick responded

wisely, saying: both can be true at once.<sup>1</sup> I'm not sure that Smith bought it, but his and Redick's relationship was strong enough to weather the storm. And both Smith and Redick were right: it's not comfortable, but the reality is that multiple, seemingly conflicting truths can coexist.

What if Redick and Smith had both quit working for ESPN and had become sworn enemies, focusing their lives on insulting each other? We might've chalked it up to the usual drama in the media and entertainment world. But that's how we often act in our society at large today.

We're allowed to remain in relationship with people with whom we deeply disagree. Of course, when our words or actions have hurt someone, then *teshuvah* is necessary - repentance through apology, redressing the damage, and committing to not repeating the harmful act or statement. But once that *teshuvah* is sincerely done, the person who caused harm is still deserving of respect and love.

The issue is that, when we feel attacked, we react emotionally and are unable to de-escalate. Our rational side loses control quickly, and we go into fight or flight mode. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt uses a powerful analogy to explain the way our brains work: the emotional side is like an elephant, and the rational side is like a human riding the elephant. The rider of the elephant looks like they are in charge, but when there's a disagreement between the elephant and the rider, the elephant

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<sup>1</sup> "JJ Redick: The Warriors look like the better team!" on First Take, ESPN, <https://youtu.be/jk9ok1GOLYM>

usually wins. It's very difficult to get back in control of an elephant on a rampage. But we can try. When you notice yourself or someone else losing control, gently name it. Say: "let's take a few minutes to cool off" or "let's resume this discussion tomorrow when we've all had a chance to process our feelings." When the elephant takes control, we might say or do things that don't align with our own sincerely held values and ideals.

From Israel to America, diversity of opinion is critical both for Jewish Peoplehood and for American social and political functioning. Israel keeps going to elections because their political parties are fracturing into smaller and smaller factions who won't work together. I don't need to remind us that polarization is also undermining social and political functioning in America.

We are witnessing the dangers of the dehumanization of one's political enemies. If we're not careful, we'll become completely ensconced in echo chambers, never entering into real relationships with people who think differently from us.

How do we resolve this? It starts with us as individuals and as communities. And this is what we learn from the end of the story of the Binding of Isaac.

As disturbing as the story is, it teaches us a critically important lesson: we must be open to hearing different perspectives, listening to diverse voices, and potentially changing our minds, our thoughts and actions.

The story would have had an even more disturbing end if Abraham had refused to listen to a new idea. Thankfully, Abraham listened to the angel who stopped him from sacrificing Isaac in the end. We often gloss over this major moment when Abraham changes his mind!

If it weren't for the angel "calling in" Abraham, who knows where we'd be. It's an example of what the Black activist and scholar Loretta J. Ross refers to as "call in" culture - meeting conflict and even hatred with respect, curiosity, and empathy, inviting others into dialogue across disagreement instead of picking a fight.<sup>2</sup>

The angel "calls in" Abraham by validating him, saying: yes, you did what you thought was right, what you believed God wanted. But now, please put down the knife.

The angel, of course, is a messenger of God. The God who said "take your son... and offer him there as a burnt offering" is the same One who said "do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him." We serve the One who can hold all of these contradictions, and the story of the Binding of Isaac is an invitation for us to hold paradoxical truths in our own hearts and minds.

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<sup>2</sup> cf. for example

<https://www.npr.org/2021/12/03/1061209084/loretta-j-ross-what-if-we-called-people-in-rather-than-callin-g-them-out> and  
<https://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/1123411049/changing-our-minds?showDate=2022-09-16>

We can, and must, contain multitudes. Every community has a right and an obligation to define its own red lines and boundaries. But it's just as dangerous to draw too many red lines as it is to have no boundaries at all. We must not allow our communities to become ideological silos. We must maintain respect for others even if we feel bewilderment at their words and actions. I honestly fear for the worst, if we allow our already frayed social connections to be fully severed.

I'm worried about the social and ethical fabric of the United States of America, and of the Jewish State of Israel. As one of my mentors says, it used to be that if you disagreed with another person politically, they were simply wrong. But now, if you disagree with someone, they're evil.<sup>3</sup>

If we disagree with someone, our primary goal should not be to prove them wrong, but rather, to learn. We don't need to fear that our own integrity will be destroyed simply by being in community with people with whom we disagree.

This is why I'm excited and hopeful about adapting the *Pardes Mahloket* (Disagreement) Matters curriculum, for our own series here at Or Atid in two months, so that we can learn how to think broadly and disagree differently.

Whether your interlocutors are friends or family members, people joining or leaving your softball team or book club, or people in your community who have a different perspective on Judaism, hang in there. Maintain the relationship. See the

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from conversation with Rabbi Gordon Tucker.

humanity and goodness in each other. Otherwise, we'll descend into deeper and deeper polarization, isolation, and dehumanization.

None of this requires us to excuse the words and actions of demagogues or abusers. On the contrary, we cannot ignore our responsibility to repair the world. And we have a responsibility to maintain and heal our relationships across differences. Both can be true.

In Jewish tradition, disagreement is holy. Rabbi Solomon Schechter, who was the second president of the Jewish Theological Seminary, said that he had once heard a fellow professor say to a student: “How dare you always agree with me? I do not even profess to agree with myself always. I would consider my work... a complete failure if this institution would not produce in the future such extremes as on the one side a raving mystic who would denounce me as a sober ignoramus; on the other side, a historian critical of taking the Torah literally, who would rail at me as a narrow-minded fanatic, while a third devotee of strict orthodoxy would raise protest against any [progressive] views I may entertain...”

We need to learn to hold our perspectives, promote our values, and pursue our goals without emotionally hurting each other.

From traditional Jews to secular Jews, from Israel to America, we need to stay curious and find ways to work together across disagreement. We need to think

and speak and act differently - not just *le-shem Shamayim*, for the sake of heaven, but for our own sake, here on earth.

Let's make it a year of sacred and productive disagreement. *Shanah tovah*.