
Let's Argue

The beginning of rabbinical school, like the beginning of most schools for any student, is a series of introductions. You meet your classmates. You go to class, meet your teachers, review a syllabus, and learn class expectations. Because it is the equivalent of a really small graduate school, everyone gets to be your acquaintance. However, there is one thing that separates rabbinical schools from other forms of higher education – the *hevruta* – the traditional Jewish style of partnered learning, where two students sit together, studying, struggling, and arguing over Jewish texts, whether that be Bible, Talmud, legal codes, or modern practical questions and answers.

I met Tiffany Gordon, now Rabbi Tiferet Berenbaum, on my first day. Since we were in class all day, for 5 days a week together, our class got to know each other quite well. During the first few weeks of school, all of our classmates experimented with what I can only call “*hevruta* speed-dating,” where we studied with each of our

classmates to gauge our learning styles and compatibility. Some of my classmates were not on my wavelength, some of my classmates and I got along too well, preventing us from really learning, but Tiffany and I hit it off. Not only were we a learning match, we became great friends, and learned together for the next 6 years of rabbinical school. We challenged each other, we clarified each other's thoughts, and we brought radically different perspectives to Torah. During our year in Israel, Tiffany had some complications getting there, and arrived halfway through the year. During that time, I was studying with different *hevruta* partners, bouncing around, trying out new learning relationships. None of them worked. I was lost, and my learning suffered for several months. When she arrived, we hadn't studied together for nearly 8 months, but the moment we cracked open our Talmuds together, we didn't miss a beat.

Even Jena could see that there was something special when Tiferet, as she had renamed herself, and I learned together. As we grew over our time in rabbinical school, we both evolved into the rabbis that we would become. Our Jewish practice started to differ, and so did the way we viewed world. We would have lively debates, where a section of Talmud would take us on wild tangents as we argued about its implications for our own personal lives and practices. There was nothing we wouldn't talk about. We grew to disagree on many things, but we based our disagreements and arguments on our love of Torah, being Jewish, and bringing Jewish life to others.

The central book of Jewish study is the Talmud, an ongoing debate about every subject known to Jews at the time. Israeli Talmud scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has called it a "book of holy intellectualism" whose spirit resides in the discussion, debate, and disagreement that animates the give-and-take of each page of

Talmud. The Talmud even describes itself as “a war of Torah.” The arguments that take place in the text of the Talmud are mirrored by the living students who argue over the meanings of the ancient Aramaic and Hebrew words. The Talmud even remarks that the best Torah scholars should be able to declare pure that which is impure by 49 different arguments, an expression meant to convey the idea that one must see an issue from all sides in order to arrive at a more refined sense of the truth.

We in America today live in a time that could benefit from the classical Jewish mode of learning through loving disagreement. Recently, political scientists have found that our nation is more polarized today than it has been at any time since the Civil War. One in six Americans has stopped talking to a family member or close friend because of the 2016 election. Millions of people now organize their social lives and look for life partners along ideological lines in order to avoid people with opposing viewpoints. The National

Academy of Sciences released an article in 2014 on “motive attribution asymmetry,” the assumption that one’s own ideology is based in love, while your political opponent’s is based in hate. These researchers found that the average Republican and the average Democrat today suffer from a level of motive attribution asymmetry that is comparable with that of the Israelis and the Palestinians. Each side thinks that it is driven by benevolence, while the other is motivated by hatred, and therefore, is an enemy with whom there can be no compromise.

Our society is filled with contempt for our political opponents. Contempt is anger mixed with distrust and the assumption of the worthlessness of another. The discourse in America has become so shockingly hyperbolic, that we ascribe the murderous ideologies of Nazism or Stalinism to the millions of ordinary Americans with whom we simply disagree. Contempt is based on the mistaken assumption that there is no room for common ground. If there is no

room for common ground, there is no reason not to fling insults at or even hate one another.

And yet, contempt is horrible for us. It makes us unhappy, unhealthy, and unattractive even to those who agree with us. It wrecks relationships. The sources of contempt are easy to identify: divisive politicians, cable news, hateful newspaper columnists, university campus activists, and social media. According to the Brookings Institute, the average Facebook user has five politically like-minded friends for every friend on the other side of the political spectrum. Even in the world of dating apps, researchers have found that people sort themselves based on political affiliation. There is also evidence that, as we become less exposed to opposing viewpoints, we become less logically competent people.

Even so, Tim Dixon, co-founder of the organization More in Common, found that 93% of Americans say they are tired of how divided we have become as a country. Large majorities say that they

believe in the importance of compromise, reject the absolutism of the extreme wings of both parties, and are not motivated by partisan loyalty. Dixon calls them the exhausted majority. This exhausted majority believes that hate speech is a problem, but so too is political correctness. Friends, we are all addicts of contempt. We hate it, we hate what it does to us, but we can't get enough of it.

We often hear calls for civility and tolerance, but those are terribly low standards. No one beams with pride as they say, "my coworkers tolerate me!" No one brags "my spouse and I are civil to each other!" Thomas Jefferson once admonished, "difference in politics should never be permitted to enter into social intercourse, or to disturb its friendships, its charities or justice." Unfortunately, it has.

How do we beat our addiction to contempt and have meaningful and productive discussions of differing opinions? The research of Dr. Jonathan Haidt can help us make great strides in this

direction. Haidt is a social psychologist who spent many years at UVA and currently teaches at NYU. He is a self-defined “North East, Jewish, academic” whose expertise is in the realm of moral psychology. He defines himself as a political centrist, and in 2015, co-founded Heterodox Academy, an organization that works to increase viewpoint diversity, mutual understanding, and productive disagreement. In his book *The Righteous Mind*, he presented research into moral foundations, which specifically addresses how both liberals and conservatives differ in their moral views. Haidt found that there are five moral values that exist among people of all races and cultures: fairness, care for others, respect for authority, loyalty to one’s group, and purity or sanctity, specifically of the body.

The good news is that all people, liberals and conservatives alike, share the moral values of fairness and care. Things get a little murky when we look into how these morals play out. Liberals express fairness through redistributive policies based on the desire

to correct an unfair playing field. Conservatives favor fairness based on merit, so that one's reward matches their efforts. Regardless, the overwhelming majority of liberals do not deny merit-based reward. Nor do conservatives deny some form of redistribution.

The same goes for compassion and care. It is a shared morality, but it manifests itself in different ways. Liberals like to show compassion by providing direct assistance like housing, food, and health care. Conservatives see compassion as helping others to help themselves through job training and wage subsidies. And yet, despite these preferences, conservatives believe in some form of direct assistance, while liberals also believe in self-reliance.

The bad news is that when it comes to respect for authority, loyalty to group, and purity or sanctity, conservatives place these three on the same level as the other two, while liberals do not see them as priorities. Conservatives might look at this and conclude that liberals are less moral than they are. However, Haidt

understands this to mean that liberals are not less moral, they simply have fewer moral foundations. Furthermore, Haidt, who has admittedly liberal-leanings, has conducted research which has shown why liberals have a harder time understanding conservative values, rather than vice versa, and are more often shocked by political outcomes like Brexit or Trump. For the most part, liberals do not register with issues about loyalty, authority, and sanctity. This has manifested itself in vast differences of opinion regarding for example, kneeling during the national anthem or flag burning, the Constitutionality of hot-button issues, and personal sexual mores.

Conservatives often use the moral dimensions of authority, loyalty, and purity as evidence liberals are immoral, unpatriotic reprobates. Liberals tend to say that conservatives want to institute a theocracy because they care about these things. Neither is true. We should not be exposed to the other side's worst ideas and

personalities, as we are now through the outrage mob that is social media and cable news. If that's all you know about the other side, then of course you won't trust them or want your legislators to compromise.

If we want to have productive arguments, we need to focus on the moral values that we share, namely compassion and fairness, rather than those held by only one part of the population. For example, if you support stricter gun legislation, rather than attacking your political opponents by saying they care more about guns than children, make the moral case that it's not fair that kids don't feel safe in school. If you oppose restrictions on 2nd Amendment rights, rather than attacking others for not caring about the Constitution, appeal to fairness and care by making the moral case that it is not fair to disarm vulnerable people and leave them unable to defend themselves from criminal violence.

All of us share a common purpose: we want to create the best America possible, and live up to our ideals and aspirations. We can do that by expressing our underlying feelings through the common moral values for why we hold a certain view. Unfortunately, we tend to fall back on mere policy positions. Our divergent moral values can make us stronger if we celebrate ideological diversity. Disagreement is good because competition of ideas is good. The book of Proverbs (27:17) teaches, “As iron sharpens iron, so does a person sharpen his fellow.” Disagreement and discussion help us innovate, improve, and find the truth.

We should not just tolerate and be civil towards those with whom we disagree. Arthur Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, has argued in his recent book *Love Your Enemies* that we must be grateful for those who disagree with us. He points out that if we don't want to live in a one-party country, then we implicitly acknowledge our gratitude for the existence of the

other party. We certainly don't have to agree with the other side. If we did, it would mean that there is no other side. But we should not turn disagreement into ingratitude. We don't want to suppress our political interlocutors any more than we would want them to suppress us. We must be equally grateful for our freedoms and their freedoms.

The Talmud (Berakhot 64a) teaches that Torah scholars increase peace in the world. Earlier, I described the process of Torah study as a "war of Torah." How can it be both? According to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, true peace is not the absence of struggle or strife, but an orchestra that requires multiple sounds and voices in order to create depth, nuance, and fullness. Argument and the hearing of contrary views is the essence of Jewish religious life, beginning when Abraham challenged God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

When it comes to human understanding, Jewish tradition acknowledges that only God has a monopoly on truth. The two schools of Hillel and Shammai argued over every matter of Jewish jurisprudence. In a famous passage from the Talmud (Eruvin 13b), we are told that both “these and those are the words of the living God,” but as a general rule, the law follows the interpretations of the students of Hillel. Why was this so? Because the scholars of the school of Hillel would teach the opinions of the school of Shammai before their own. While this is commonly attributed to the school of Hillel’s humility and etiquette, we might also interpret it to be a commitment to a deliberate and inclusive approach of considering another opinion first.

In another passage of Talmud (Yevamot 14b) that resonates with today’s practice of picking life partners based on political persuasion, we are told that even though the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai came to different conclusions about the issues of

marriage and divorce and the value of dowries and bride prices, the scholars of these two schools did not refrain from marrying women from families of the other school. They put into practice the verse from the prophet Zechariah (8:19), “Love truth and peace.” Truth and peace are often contradictory values, but in this case, one value trumped both of them: *K'lal Yisrael*, the preservation of the unity of the Jewish People.

Unfortunately, things were not all sunshine and rainbows for the schools of Hillel and Shammai. One rabbinic story (Yerushalmi Shabbat, Chapter 1, Column 3, Halacha 4) tells the that the disciples of Hillel and Shammai met one day on the second floor of the house of Chananiah ben Chezikiah ben Gurion. They counted everyone there, and the students of Shammai outnumbered the students of Hillel. On that day, eighteen new laws were decreed, but tradition says that that day was as bad for the Jews as the day on which the Golden Calf was made. Why? Because the students of Shammai blocked the doors

and killed the students of Hillel. Why did the students of Shammai take such violent action? Were they tired of being outnumbered? Were they tired of losing? Or did they feel that their ideology was so pure that it warranted the violent silencing of opposing voices? Whatever the reason, tradition considers the sin of contempt gone wild, on par with the building of the Golden Calf.

After our first year of rabbinical school, for some reason I never understood, our teachers wanted us to confidentially evaluate our *hevruta* learning partners, filling out a questionnaire. It seemed pointless at the time because our class pairings were working so well. And it all wound up coming to nothing because we kept our same pairs the following year. After comparing how we filled out the form, Tiferet and I learned that we each gave the same answer to the question, “Do you want to remain with your *hevruta* next year? Why or why not?” Out of solidarity with each other in our hopes of remaining together, Tiferet and I each wrote on our own form a

well-known phrase from the Talmud, “*hevruta o metuta*,” Aramaic for “partnership or death.” Later, we learned that the phrase came from the end of a tragic story of two rabbis from the Talmud, which sheds light on how contempt can destroy a loving partnership.

Rabbi Yochanan was known as one of the most talented Torah scholars of all time, and he happened upon Shimon ben Lakish, who made his living as a brigand. He was a literal highway robber. They were both experts in their craft: Torah and thievery. However, upon their meeting, they both recognized something special in each other. Rabbi Yochanan convinced Shimon ben Lakish to come study Torah with him, and he eventually became a rabbi, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, or Resh Lakish for short. He also married Rabbi Yochanan’s sister. Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish’s arguments and disagreements can be found all over the Talmud.

One day, they were discussing the point at which metal weapons acquire ritual impurity, a relatively insignificant matter in

the grand scheme of things. Rabbi Yochanan offered one opinion, and Resh Lakish offered another. Seemingly out of nowhere, Rabbi Yochanan replied with a contemptuous ad hominem attack, “As a thief, you would know!” Resh Lakish responded in kind, “How have you helped me? I was a master then, and I’m a master now!” Things escalated quickly. Rabbi Yochanan, deeply hurt, retorted, “I brought you under the wings of God’s presence!” Resh Lakish was also hurt, and they went their separate ways.

Rabbi Yochanan’s sister came to him and tried to get him to apologize to his study partner and brother-in-law, but he dug in, and not long after, Resh Lakish died. Rabbi Yochanan began to regret his earlier actions. The other Rabbis wanted to do something to ease his mind, and provided him with a new study partner, but the new partner agreed with every one of Rabbi Yochanan’s arguments. Eventually, he got fed up. “You’re supposed to take the place of Resh Lakish? Anytime I said something, he challenged me on it in 24

ways, and I would challenge him back in 24 more ways, and that's how we would decide the law. I don't need a 'yes man.' I don't need you to tell me I'm right!" He left the study house, never to return, and died a lonely man.

It's unclear why Rabbi Yochanan originally lashed out at Resh Lakish or why Resh Lakish responded equally with contempt, but it is a cautionary tale about where even the best partnership can lead to, if we succumb to our baser instincts as individuals and as a society, instead of responding with warm-heartedness and love. *Hevruta o metuta*. Partnership or Death.

Friends, the personal is not political. There are people, and there are ideas. We are autonomous individuals, created in the image of God, and each of us deserves radical human dignity, independent of our politics. Unfortunately, everything is getting too political. Even the way we buy our sneakers and use internet search

engines has become politicized. We are even getting the inkling that there even might be red and blue restaurants.

How do we prevent this from happening? We must return to our shared values and get out of our bubbles and silos. Find your *hevruta*, your study partner, your interlocutor. Find the Shammai to your Hillel, the John McCain to your Joe Lieberman, the Tiffany Gordon to your Hal Schevitz. Each of us needs a person we trust to learn and practice disagreement in a spirit of love and warm-heartedness, so that we can develop the ability to disagree constructively with others. Listen with empathy, and not just to rebut. Don't attack or insult. Don't even try to win. The point of disagreement is not to win, but to enrich the discussion, test out your point of view in a respectful way, and enlighten someone you care about. Never assume the motives of another person, and for God's sake, don't argue about big issues on social media. It is a faceless cesspool of assumptions and hatred.

We should not disagree less, but disagree better. To do this, we must turn away from the people on our own side who engage in the culture of contempt. No one has ever been insulted into changing their position on an issue. We have all been guilty of contempt. At this time of turning, let us see contempt as an opportunity to respond with warm-heartedness. In his book *Love Your Enemies*, Arthur Brooks tells the story of how he received a long, insulting, and expletive-laden email from someone who disagreed with the premises and conclusions of a previous book. As he was about to respond with equal contempt, Brooks came to a stunning realization – “this guy read my book, and not only that, he took the time to write this email!” In his email reply, Brooks simply wrote, “Thanks for reading my book!” It began a series of productive conversations between the two.

Rabbinic tradition tells that the 2nd Temple was destroyed because of *sinat ḥinam*, free-flowing hatred. Even though the

majority of Jews at the time were engaged in Torah study and observed the commandments, they had senseless, free-flowing hatred in their hearts, and did not observe of the common norms of humanity. Back then, Jews of different opinions and practices thought that those who weren't exactly like them in their reverence towards God were heretics. They practiced a much earlier version of today's phenomenon of "cancel culture," believing that one should be silenced or ostracized for their beliefs or previous actions. The Netziv, a 19th century commentator wrote, "God does not have patience for 'righteous people' such as these, unless they also observe the common norms of humanity, even though they might claim they are acting for the sake of heaven."

Thankfully, our society is not there yet, nor are we at the brink of Civil War. At that time in our nation's history, Abraham Lincoln, in his first inaugural address, just a few months before that war started, gave us these famous words, "We are not enemies, but

friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

We are not enemies if we share a common cause. Yom Kippur affords us the opportunity to look inward, to reflect on how we have not been our best selves, and to begin making the changes we need in order to repair our relationships. It is possible, and even more so necessary, that we carry two simultaneous truths: We should never betray our convictions, and we must also never treat someone else in a way that we would not want to be treated.

On this Day of Atonement, let us look into our hearts, identify that contempt, and resist our desire to use it towards others.

May we work to engage in sacred disagreement, arguing for our own causes with passion and determination, while also recognizing the inherent dignity within those with whom we disagree, and when we speak to them, may it be with warm-heartedness and love. *Ken Y'hi Ratzon*. May this be God's will. Amen.