

10 Commandments for Civility in Public Discourse

Compiled and edited by Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun

1. “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18. Rabbi Akiba: this is the **most** important mitzvah) Remember that even when you strongly disagree with another on a particular subject he or she is still “your neighbor.”
2. “What is hateful to you do not to others.” (Shabbat 31a – Hillel) Would you say these things about someone else if they were standing in front of you at the time? How **would** you express your disagreement with them if they **were** standing there? Would you want them to say things like this about you?
3. B’tzelem Elohim – We are all created in God’s image. (Genesis Rabbah 24:7 – Ben Azzai said **this** is the most important statement in the Torah.) Face to face: see the Spark of the Divine in the other person. Do not shame or embarrass them.
4. “Be of the disciples of Aaron – loving peace and pursuing peace.” (Avot 1:12 - Hillel)
5. “Receive everyone with a cheerful countenance.” (Avot 1:15 – *Shammai* -?!) Smile! Make a friendly joke (not a mean one!) to lighten a tense moment.
6. “Judge everyone with the scale tipped in their favor.” (Avot 1:6) Give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Try to understand where they are coming from, what they are feeling.
7. “Do not hate your sibling in your heart.” (Leviticus 19:17) We are all “siblings” of each other – all descendants of Adam and Eve.
8. Do not pray for the death of your enemies but for their repentance (*Berakhot* 10a - Beruriah to her husband Rabbi Meir)
9. **How to argue:** It is recorded that the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai disputed for three years over whose view was correct in matters of Jewish law. A voice from heaven, a *bat kol*, announced that ► **both views were the words of God** [there is some truth to the other view, admit it up front] but that the law was in accordance with the view of the school of Hillel. Why, the Talmud asks, if both views are the word of God, should the school of Hillel prevail in establishing the law? The answer given is because they were ► **kind** [don’t be nasty, resort to name-calling, etc.] and ► **modest**. [humility is a worthy trait in debate: be open to listening to the other side, accepting that you may not have all of the truth, etc.] They ► **studied both their own position** [know the facts and arguments which support your position!] and the ► **position of the school of Shammai**, [know the facts and arguments your opponents will use so you can come prepared to answer them] and they ► **cited the opposing view first** even before their own (*Eruvin* 13b). An Argument should be an attempt to persuade others to your point of view, not to stoke the fire of those who already agree with you or to vent your anger and frustration. (This is very hard to remember and apply!!!)
10. “If you have done some minor wrong to another, consider it a big thing (and make a BIG apology), while if you have done someone a great benefit, consider it a minor thing (and do not expect a “thank you”). On the other hand, if someone has done you a minor favor, consider it a big thing (and give a BIG “thank you”), while if another has done something very bad to you, try to see it as a small thing (and try not to bear a grudge, accept an apology if offered, but don’t expect one). (Avot d’Rabbi Natan 41). We all have a tendency to overrate or underrate an event to suit our own “self-centered” position. It is wise to try and counterbalance this tendency as suggested in this wise adage from our tradition.