

## **UNO at Thanksgiving**

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**November 22, 2019**

In an effort to make the holiday season as nonpartisan as possible, Mattel is releasing a limited-edition UNO deck of cards with politically neutral colors. "No red or blue cards means no taking sides!" Mattel said on its website, referring to the color blue used by Democrats and red co-opted by Republicans. "Whether you lean a little left or a little right, one thing we can all agree on is how much we love UNO®!"

A video accompanying the message said around 40 percent of people admit that opposing political views in their families are problematic. A 2017 survey by the American Psychological Association found 38 percent of respondents said their stress level increases during the holiday season, partly due to family gatherings.

Mattel urged players to take a break from the current politically partisan climate. The deck even comes with a "veto card" to skip the political talk and keep things civil. The card skips that player's next turn and makes them change the subject.

While one can easily find the humor in this report and think it is a joke, I can assure you it is not. The game was released at Walmart yesterday for \$4.97.

It is a shame that the current political landscape has led to divisiveness at the dinner table. During this time of year, the secular Thanksgiving holiday (and the holiday season in general) is filled with themes of gratitude, joy, and family. While

there may have always been disagreements amongst family members, the intensity of these disagreements, especially in terms of politics, has seemingly increased over the past years.

And, yes, we may be able find some correlations between this trend and the political climate that has surfaced over the past years. But this sermon is not just about the politics that have caused tensions at the dinner table. This sermon is about why we need not waste this holiday on our disagreements—or even turkey.

In an article recently published on eJewish Philanthropy, Maya Bernstein and Rae Ringel note that when people gather together there is an opportunity for transformation. People coming together in the same physical space to eat, converse, and be together is an increasingly rare and unique opportunity. But it is an opportunity to create meaningful connections.

They assert that we spend so much energy in the planning and preparing of the Thanksgiving meal, and perhaps so much energy mentally preparing ourselves for what could be a stressful holiday, that we forget that these gatherings are truly sacred. They are moments in which we can, if we choose to, focus less on the details and more on the connections we make with each other—more about the energy we can put into touching each other's hearts and souls.

I'd like to share with you the ways they suggest that we can elevate our Thanksgiving experience beyond the food and disagreements and into people's hearts. For them, it is as simple as A, B, C. When preparing for any gathering, they outline three questions that we should ask ourselves:

A — “Affective” — How do I want people to feel as a result of this gathering? Empowered, included, motivated, connected, appreciated? Or might there be a fire you want to light to create a sense of productive discomfort?

B — “Behavioral” — What do I want them to be able to do at the end of the experience? How is their behavior going to be different as a result of this? Stay in close touch throughout the year, or be more open and vulnerable when together? Address difficult parts of the past? Or simply gather more often?

C — “Cognitive” — What do I want them to understand? What new things will they learn? Something new about your shared family history? Can there be a generational exchange of ideas and skills?

The answers to these questions are the basis for any gathering. It is crucial, as they point out, to know where you are going and why, and to articulate your final destination before heading out on the road.

Part of that GPS for us dinner hosts may include sending a group email ahead, setting an expectation that discourages conflict. Suggest that everyone switch seats between courses. That way, if there is a particularly stressful pairing at the table, you’ll be disrupting and resetting it so that no one has to be stuck in a difficult conversation for the whole meal. Be proactive about creating a family-wide conversation. Invite your guests to play a game aimed at creating one conversation around the table and giving everyone a chance to connect. The answers can lead to some surprising and interesting conversations.

Back to the nonpartisan limited-edition UNO set: the classic red and blue cards of UNO with more politically neutral colors of orange and purple. The new packaging is purple as well; being an intermediate color formed of red and blue, it should encourage people to find some common ground.

And there's no doubt that Thanksgiving and this season can bring feelings of stress as you organize your celebrations and prepare for family, but this is also an annual opportunity to slow down and remember what this season is about. It is the chance for us to remember that our common ground is each other—that we care about the people at our table and are grateful for their presence in our lives.

And if all that doesn't work, just make them “Draw Four.”

Shabbat Shalom.