

The Hard Conversation: The Key to the Future of the American Jewish Community

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Rabbi Neil S. Cooper (Final)

Two mothers were desperate to find a *shiduch* for their respective daughters. Living in a small shtetel in Europe, where everyone knew everyone else, prospects of finding a good match were...poor. And so, each mother wrote to the rabbi of the Yeshiva in the nearby town, imploring him to send a *shiduch* for their daughters. Each woman received an assurance from the yeshiva's rabbi that he would send one of his best students to their town to meet with the prospective in-laws.

A few days later, the train from that nearby town pulled into the station and the crowds had dispersed, one lonely yeshiva *bucher* remained. Thin and gaunt, he had the complexion of a person who was going outside for the first time in his life. He looked intelligent (whatever that means) and was clearly a pious young man. Each woman ran toward the bewildered young man. The young man froze, paralyzed, like a deer in headlights. The women reached him simultaneously, each grabbing his coat firmly.

He's mine, said the first woman. He's mine said the second one. And they pulled at him, unable to loosen the other's grip. After a while, one of the women said: This is silly. Let's take the young man to the synagogue and let our rabbi decide. Fine, said the other.

They went directly to the rabbi. Each recounted how they had contacted the rabbi in the next town who had sent them a yeshiva *bucher*. The rabbi listened intently to both women. Finally, the rabbi spoke to each woman. To the first, he asked:

What do you think is a good way to handle this situation? The first woman responded: I think that we should flip a coin.

The rabbi then turned to the second woman and said: And how do **you** think we should solve our problem? How can this be resolved?

The second woman said: Well, since we both saw him at the same time and grabbed his coat at the same time, I think that we should cut him in half.

To which the rabbi responded: Now there's the mother-in-law!

This classic Jewish joke has roots in the Talmud. It reminds us of the famous Talmudic passage, studied by children when they begin to study Talmud, a passage which I have shared with you before. The passage is found at the very begin of the Tractate known as Baba Metzia, Chapter 1 Mishnah 1. Here is what the Talmud describes:

Two people see a garment on the ground, with no one around to claim it. The garment is *hefker*/ownerless, which means that finders can be keepers. Except, in this case, two have seen it, grabbed it and each declared it to belonged to him.

One says, I found it. The other says, I found it. One says, it is mine. The other says, it's mine.

How can we resolve this in a way that isn't a joke? Each has a claim to the *tallit*, but neither's claim is so compelling as to be given the Tallit with the other receiving nothing. Furthermore, if the garment is split, giving each one a half (the mother-in-law's suggestion), everyone loses. What are we to do? Each disputant has a legitimate claim of partial ownership. Each disputant believes that his claim has greater merit than the other's. Each believes that he is right.

I imagine them staring at each other, holding on to the garment as tightly as they can, not giving an inch, but at a loss regarding how to find an equitable way to resolve issues, how to compromise. Neither knows how to talk to the other, using the language and tone of reconciliation and compromise.

Yesterday I spoke of a culture of hate which permeates our and Israeli societies. Today I focus on civil discourse, reconciliation and compromise, on the ability to listen with empathy and respond with sensitivity, are indispensable of the conversations we must conduct within the American Jewish Community.

We have lost the ability and, perhaps the desire, to engage in conversations of any significant weight, in ways which do not threaten a sense of personal wellbeing on either side and in a way that allows friendships to remain intact following the conversation. Is there a way to converse, a way to agree on some things and disagree on others? We are like the two people holding on tightly to the same item, each clinging to his/her truth, with an iron grip, believing that the garment or, perhaps, the tightly held belief, belongs only to them.

In her best-selling book, The Art of Gathering, Priya Parker, explores the purpose and quality of gatherings, meetings and other get-togethers. Her book is useful as a source of guidance for those of us for whom meetings seem, at times, cruel and unusual punishment. She offers practical suggestions for convening and orchestrating meetings. And she has an entire Chapter

about difficult conversations, conversations about subjects we have been told never to discuss: Sex, Politics and Religion. I think Ms. Parker is correct. These conversations can, should and must take place and I would like to tell you how.

Today, I offer five suggestions for engaging in difficult and emotionally charged conversations. These rules are part of my effort to deal with the difficult topics which have polarized our country. As electioneering is in full swing, Democrats and Republicans must find ways to come together. I do this under the heading of **RNC /DNC** (I am sure you know what these initials stand for):

Rabbi Neil Cooper's Guide for Difficult and Neglected Conversations. The first Rule is Name Calling and Labeling

#1: No Name Calling/The President Trump Rule (See page 9 for the entire list of rules)

Name-calling has taken root in the US as an effective, albeit mean-spirited tactic to disarm and frustrate one's opposition. We see this practice occurring more frequently now, with the increasing support and encouragement of those who hold some of the highest offices in this country. (I call this the President Trump Rule). Assigning a name to a person belies the complexity and the nuances of a position. Name-calling denigrates, belittles and bullies and it must stop.

Anti-Semitism is one of those labels we need to extricate from our vocabularies. That is not to say that there is no longer a problem of anti-Semitism. But the term has been overused to the point where its very specific meaning has been seriously devalued. When one member of the Israeli Knesset calls another an anti-Semite (which happens with some frequency) the term itself has lost its specific and very dangerous meaning. Today, those who criticize Israel are called anti-Semitic. Were that, in fact, the case, half of Israel, for whom criticism of the government has been elevated to an art form, would be categorized as anti-Semitic! When one is labeled by the other as an anti-Semite, the conversation becomes focused on whether a particular position or person is or is not anti-Semitic rather than focusing on the motivation of our critics.

Criticism of Israel is fine and appropriate in a dispute over policies or politics. That is not anti-Semitism. When the conversation veers to a discussion of the **legitimacy** of the Jewish State, however, when there is a lack of concern for the lives and well-being of all of the people who live in the land, when the discussion is more visceral than substantive, characterized by raised voices and arguments intended to vilify and delegitimize, when simplistic and hateful labels are

used to characterize Jews or Israel, then the desire to understand each other has given way to expressions motivated by hate.

My advice: steer clear of those arguments and discussions. No minds have ever been changed as a result of these sorts of discussions. Once name-calling and labeling are introduced into the conversation, there is no more room for a meaningful conversation. (At that point, change the conversation to some other unpleasant topic, the Phillies or Eagles, always good for an upsetting conversation.

I wrote a letter to the congregation about a month ago in which I discussed the travel ban placed on the two Muslim women who are representatives to the US Congress. In my letter I expressed my concern about the ban. I believe that Israel made a mistake in banning the women. Israel is always open to criticism and those criticisms do not harm or injure Israel. Israel has nothing to hide, lots to share. Israel is strong enough to endure legitimate criticism, learn from it and be strengthened by those criticisms.

If the American Jewish Community is going to remain strong and vibrant, if we are to heal the rifts within the American Jewish Community and the growing gap between the American Jews and the Israeli establishment, we will need to figure out how to speak about divisive issues.

I have plenty of things to say about how I feel let-down, ignored and overlooked by Israel. But I also believe that there is and must be an unbreakable bond between the American Jewish Community and the State of Israel. We are still trying to define and strengthen that relationship by engaging in conversations which may not help us come to a unified position but will help us to understand and appreciated each other more. Both Israel and the American Jewish Community need each other. We don't have the luxury, nor do I believe that we have the desire, to allow the bonds between us to break. And that means we need to talk in the US and in Israel, as Americans and as Jews. And that means that we cannot use labels to characterize each other. We cannot revert to name-calling to get where we need to go. **Rule #1: (Pres. Trump Rule: We need to stop the name-calling).**

#2. We need to stand where the other stands? The Mount Hermon Church Rule.

When we are confronted by beliefs and positions that are challenging to us, one needs, I believe, put him/herself in the other's place. Imagine what the world looks like from where they are standing.

One of the more rewarding aspects of my rabbinate has been in the area of interfaith dialogue. And, I have learned a great deal about Christianity and about Judaism from that involvement.

A few months ago, I was invited to the Mt. Hermon Church in West Philadelphia to speak on the topic of "Israel in the Hebrew Bible". My good friend, who some of you have met, Bishop Hayward Smith, invited me to speak as part of series of classes for a course being given for members of several local churches. The students were chosen from those who wanted to delve deeper into their understanding of Christianity.

And so, I spoke about Abraham, who left his home and birthplace to go to the Land of Israel. And from the time of Abraham, to the Jewish Community today, our collective DNA, as descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as descendants of the Children of Israel, includes a powerful pull toward the Land of Israel. I spoke about my own connections to Israel, to the Land, it's language and its people, which now include two of my three children and six of my grandchildren.

At the end of my presentation, I invited questions. And one question remains with me. Here was the question: Given all the pain and suffering, the death and sorrow, the wars both ancient and modern over the Land and the claim of Palestinian Arabs, what does it feel like to be a Jew?

I thought for a moment and responded in two parts:

The Jewish People are the most hated people in all human history. Why people hate us, I don't really know, except for the fact that we believe differently and behave/celebrate differently. At the same time, Judaism has outlasted every evil empire.

As part of this ancient tradition I have confidence that we shall persevere and so it feels at once tiring and energizing. To be a Jew feels simultaneously depressing and joyful, living with the confidence that we shall survive. However long it takes, we'll still be here.

But, to feel Jewish also means to be on the periphery of society, at times. At times we have been marginalized, at times, part of a group of which the rest of the world is wary and suspicious. It is not that we want to be contentious. But because we are different, historically speaking, we must be prepared to be taken to task, asked to explain, criticized and even ostracized because of those differences.

At that point, I told the woman questioner that she had asked an excellent but difficult question. “So, let me ask you a similarly difficult question: What does it feel like to be an African American, with your legacy of slavery, of fighting for civil rights, of fighting prejudice and bigotry?” And the woman who asked, now answered: “I think, to be an African American feels a bit like being a Jew”.

When we can understand the other, when we can stand in another’s place, we are better prepared to understand each other. (**#2 The Mount Hermon Church Rule**)

#3. We must choose our words and tone carefully / The Parrot Rule

Three times each day we pray designated prayers which always include the Amidah. And, each time we recite the Amidah we conclude with a personal, prayer or meditation that begins with these words: *Elohai n’tzor...*

My God, help me stop my lips from uttering evil just as you protect me from those who curse me...Open my heart to your Torah. Confound the thoughts of those who wish me harm.

When we speak with those with whom we differ, we think of words which are cruel, biting, angry and confrontational. We use those words hoping to injure the recipient. But I have learned something else (as one with whom such conversations are not infrequent): the words that we initially would like to use, defile us more than the person at whom the words were directed.

A good friend shared with me a story of a man with a parrot.

The parrot was beautiful and smart but had a very foul mouth. And no matter what anyone would say to the bird, the response would contain a curse word. Finally, the bird’s owner said, if you say one more dirty word you will get a severe punishment. Not five minutes later, the bird could not restrain itself and blurted out a word on the “do not say” list. “That’s it”, said the owner, and he promptly took the parrot and put him into the freezer. Fifteen minutes later the man took the half-frozen bird out of the freezer and said, “Well, have you learned your lesson?”. Absolutely, said the parrot. I shall never again utter those words, but, if you don’t mind me asking, what did those chickens do?

Words spoken in anger, have never convinced anyone that they are wrong. On the contrary, that language inflames, demeans, defames and antagonizes while denying the possibility of reconciliation. **(The Parrot Rule: Choose your words carefully).**

#4. We need to be passionate, informed and articulate about our Message: The Rev. Jerry Falwell Rule

Being passionate in your **opposition** to a position or argument is easy. It is more difficult and more important, however, to be passionate and informed about what **you** do believe.

I remember many years ago at a Convention of the Rabbinical Assembly at the Concord Hotel in the Catskills (where the food wasn't good, and the portions were too small) we invited the Evangelist (and lover of Israel) Jerry Falwell to speak. After a rousing speech about Israel and "the God of the Jews and Christians" he took questions. One of my senior colleagues stood to ask a question:

Rev. Falwell: You are targeting Jews for Conversion to Christianity. We cannot have close, collegial relations if you are focusing your missionary efforts on the Jews. Why can't you stop trying to convert the Jews? Falwell smiled and responded:

Rabbi, he said, I would love for us to have a closer and more collegial relationship. But let me tell you this: Missionary work is our bread and butter. It is what we do. So, I cannot say that we will no longer proselytize. But, if our missionaries are enticing your members away from the fold of Jewish Life, don't look at me and ask me not to do my job. Look at yourself and ask: Am I doing **my** job?!

Difficult conversations require not simply arguing **against** the position of another. Difficult conversations require that we develop the ability to articulate our faith, our beliefs and our convictions. This is particularly the case on college campuses around the country. As reports following the start of the academic year arrive, we are learning that there are documented increases in anti-Semitism on campus, picking up where things were left before the summer break. Our students must be prepared to advocate, to inform and to express with passion, their views about Israel and the Jewish Community. In the class I will be teaching to our High School students through our Hebrew High School (LMAHH), I am putting aside the texts I usually teach and working with our students on how to respond to anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism when they reach college. **(#4. The Rev. Jerry Falwell Rule: Know what you believe in and be prepared to vigorously and passionately articulate and support it)**

#5. The Mezuzah Rule: The Challenge of Pluralism. We can still be a community if we do not share the same beliefs on every issue. We need to understand that those with whom we disagree believe as passionately in their position as you believe in yours. And, for that reason, when dealing with Israel or other issues which can become contentious, can you accept as having some legitimacy a view which does not agree with yours? Can you say: I see your point. I understand how you have come to your conclusion. I however, see things differently. We can disagree on this point but still find places to agree.

Let's take a different issue as an example: Can you have a productive and fruitful conversation with a person who disagrees with you on the issue of abortion? I have had a discussion with a congregant and, early into the conversation, within seconds, in fact, I felt the conversation spiraling down, at which point I said: Can we go back to talking about Israel and the Palestinians?!

Some topics may be too incendiary at a given time to discuss.

I sent a letter to the congregation following the simultaneous mass shooting in Pittsburg, TX and OH. I said, among other things, that I did not blame the President for the shootings, but I believe that he is responsible to act directly and forcefully in responding to the shootings. Unfortunately, he was not as forceful as I would have liked, but for my less than adamant position, I received several impassioned responses on both sides of the issue, all of which began with the words saying:

With respect, rabbi, you are wrong. He **is** responsible”.

Or, “You are wrong, Rabbi, the Pres **is neither** to blame nor is he responsible.

I don't know if I am right or wrong. Some of the comments were generated over a misunderstanding over the “blame” and “responsible”. But what was more important was that we were able to exchange ideas and thoughts on what is clearly a controversial topic and emerge unscathed (I think).

And I would thank by name those who wrote to disagree with me, but we would be here way too long for that. But we had, I think, a productive exchange in which I was able to state my position. Others weighed in, for and against. We ended understanding each other, accepting the possibility of multiple positions. We desperately need to do this.

This, my friends, is the central point. This is what pluralism is about: the ability to be right without the other person being wrong. The possibility that this may be right for you but that is

not right for me. I need not convince you that you are wrong. I can try to convince you, however, how I see myself as being right. And, because we see the legitimacy of the other's view, maybe, just maybe we could find a compromise. And this brings us to my fifth rule:

#5. The Mezuzah Rule.

What is the proper way to affix a mezuzah to a doorpost? In the Code of Jewish law, the שולחן ערוך all agree, it should be on the right side of the door as one enters the room or the house. All agree that the mezuzah should be affixed about a third of the way of the way down from the top. But there was a disagreement regarding whether the mezuzah should be affixed straight, up and down or lying on its side. And the answer, (which we studied with the class I gave in reviewing my sources for this sermon): let's compromise. Hang the mezuzah on the right side, tilting in, on an angle. And what is interesting here is that the compromise satisfies neither of the accepted positions, yet, today, everyone uses the compromise.

Next time you enter a Jewish home, look at the mezuzah. If it is properly hung, it will be tilted in, on an angle. And when you see that, think about why it is on an angle. It is angled because in Jewish Life, as in life in general, there is not always a right or wrong answer. Life can move forward even if we cannot agree on everything. Sometimes we need to compromise. Sometimes we need to agree to disagree.

The American Jewish Community is at a crossroad. The paths before us do not take us toward right or wrong. The path we must take will not take us to the right or the left. In fact, we may need to choose a new path altogether. Whatever we decide, however, will determine the nature and the tenor of the American Jewish Community and, possibly, our connection to Israel, for the future.

Rabbi Neil Cooper's Five Rules for Having Productive Conversations
About Matters Which We Don't Like Talking About

(Rabbi Neil Cooper's Guide for Difficult and Neglected Conversations)

RNC / DNC

1. The President Trump Rule
2. The Mount Hermon Church Rule
3. The Parrot Rule
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