

# Civil Discourse at Home, in the Office, and Out in the Community: A Jewish Conversation



with Rabbi Shira Stutman, *Senior Rabbi*  
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# Goal for the Evening

Inspire people to engage in/serve as leaders who prioritize one of the most counter-cultural endeavors of our time: **civil discourse.**

# Conflicts

1. Between this work, which is hard and upsetting, and the celebratory feeling this evening. But it's the most important leadership work around.
2. Between our time frame, 90 minutes, and how long it actually takes to understand how to participate civil discourse, which is hours and hours (or perhaps a lifetime?).
3. There are different levels/kinds of skills already in this room. That's a good thing.

# Outline of the Evening

- Review goals/purposes/structure (5 min)
- Opening talk (10 min)
- Set communication agreements/norms going forward (5 min)
- Text study (10 min)
- Report out/Civil Discourse Middot (15 min)
- Ladder of inference (5 min)
- Learn/practice civil discourse skills, specifically listening (25-30 min)
- Reflections/questions/closing (5-10 min)
- Celebration continues!



**Simon**  
Bandit-turned-  
scholar



**Joe**  
Scholar

# Proposed Communication Agreement\*

1. We can “pass” if we are not ready or do not wish to respond. No explanations required.
2. We will express ourselves in ways that promote connection and learning.
3. We’ll speak one at a time, and not interrupt or engage in side conversations.
4. We’ll “step up/step back,” taking responsibility for contributing and for making space for others to contribute.

\*Based on text by Essential Partners

# Proposed Communication Agreement\*

5. We will be attentive and seek to understand, especially when differences surface.
6. We'll check out our assumptions by asking questions.
7. We will speak for ourselves (speak as "I" not "we") and allow others to do the same.
8. We'll respect any requests for confidentiality from other participants and will not speak outside the group in a way that could allow others to be identified.

\*Based on text by Essential Partners

# *The Dignity of Difference*

## **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**

“Truth on earth is not, nor can be, the whole truth. It is limited, not comprehensive; particular, not universal. When two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true the other false. It may be, and often is, that each represents a different perspective on reality, an alternative way of structuring order, no more and no less commensurable than a Shakespeare sonnet, a Michelangelo painting or a Schubert sonata.”

# *The Dignity of Difference*

## **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**

“In heaven there is truth; on earth there are truths. Therefore, each culture has something to contribute. Each person knows something no one else does. The sages said: ‘Who is wise? One who learns from all men.’ The wisest is not one who knows himself wiser than others: he is one who knows all men have some share of the truth, and is willing to learn from them, for none of us knows all the truth and each of us knows some of it.”

# *The Dignity of Difference*

## Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

1. Rabbi Sacks wrote this text before we had such phrases as “fake news” or “truthiness.” Is he correct that there are indeed multiple truths on earth?
2. Can you think of situations in which he could be proven wrong, or in which people might argue for “multiple truths” when you’re pretty sure there’s only one? Or vice versa?

# Four Middot of Civil Discourse

#1: Facts are facts. But often, there are multiple truths.

# *Likutei Moharan, Part II 8*

## **Rabbi Nachman of Breslov**

“And even though rebuke is a great thing and it is incumbent upon each Jew to rebuke his friend when he sees him acting in a way that is not allowed...even so not everyone is able to rebuke. As Rabbi Akiva said, ‘I would be surprised if there is a person in our generation who is able to rebuke.’”

# *Likutei Moharan, Part II 8*

## **Rabbi Nachman of Breslov**

“And if Rabbi Akiva said this about his generation, all the more so today. Because when one rebukes who is not able to rebuke, then one will not be able to receive his rebuke and he causes a putrid smell in the souls that hear his rebuke. Because by means of his rebuke, he [actually] arouses the nasty scent of the bad actions and bad qualities in those he rebukes.”

# *Likutei Moharan, Part II 8*

## **Rabbi Nachman of Breslov**

1. Explain this text in plain language. What is it trying to teach?
2. What types of people are “not able to rebuke”?
3. According to this definition, are you “able to rebuke”? Are there certain arenas in which you’re not?
4. And what’s with the connection between rebuke and smell? Why that sense specifically?

# Four Middot of Civil Discourse

#1: Facts are facts. But often, there are multiple truths.

#2: Be self-aware. Show up properly.

# *Talmud Eruvin 13b:10-14*

“Rabbi Abba said in the name of Shmuel, For three years, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued. One said, ‘The halakha is like us,’ and the other said, ‘The halakha is like us.’ A heavenly voice spoke: ‘These and these are the words of the living G-d, and the halakha is like the House of Hillel.’”

# *Talmud Eruvin 13b:10-14*

“A question was raised: Since the heavenly voice declared: ‘Both these and those are the words of the Living G-d,’ why was the halacha established to follow the opinion of Hillel? It is because the students of Hillel were kind and gracious. They taught their own ideas as well as the ideas from the students of Shammai. Not only for this reason, but they went so far as to teach Shammai’s opinions first.”

# *Talmud Eruvin 13b:10-14*

1. What does it mean for both to be “words of the living G-d”?
2. Given that both are “words of living Gd,” why do we choose one over the other? What is gained? What is lost?

# Four Middot of Civil Discourse

#1: Facts are facts. But often, there are multiple truths.

#2: Be self-aware. Show up properly.

#3: Challenging people's ideas isn't a problem; it's an honor. Insulting people is a problem.

Ad hominem attacks are the problem.

# *Pirkei Avot 5:7*

“Seven things are [found] in an unformed person and seven in a wise person. A wise person does not speak in front of someone who is greater than him in wisdom or in number; and he does not interrupt the words of his fellow; and is not impulsive in answering; and he asks to the point and answers as is proper; and he speaks to the first [point] first and the last [point] last; and about that which he has not heard [anything], says, ‘I have not heard [anything]’; and he concedes to the truth. And their opposites [are the case] with an unformed person.”

# *Pirkei Avot 5:7*

1. In general, is this the type of advice you'd give to someone else? Or keep for yourself?
2. How do you understand “he speaks about the first first, and the last last?”
3. Think about everything you've learned thus far this evening (and in your life) about civil discourse. How might you translate this list into an instruction manual for civil discourse? What words of wisdom might you add to this list? Remove/change?

# Four Middot of Civil Discourse

#1: Facts are facts. But often, there are multiple truths.

#2: Be self-aware. Show up properly.

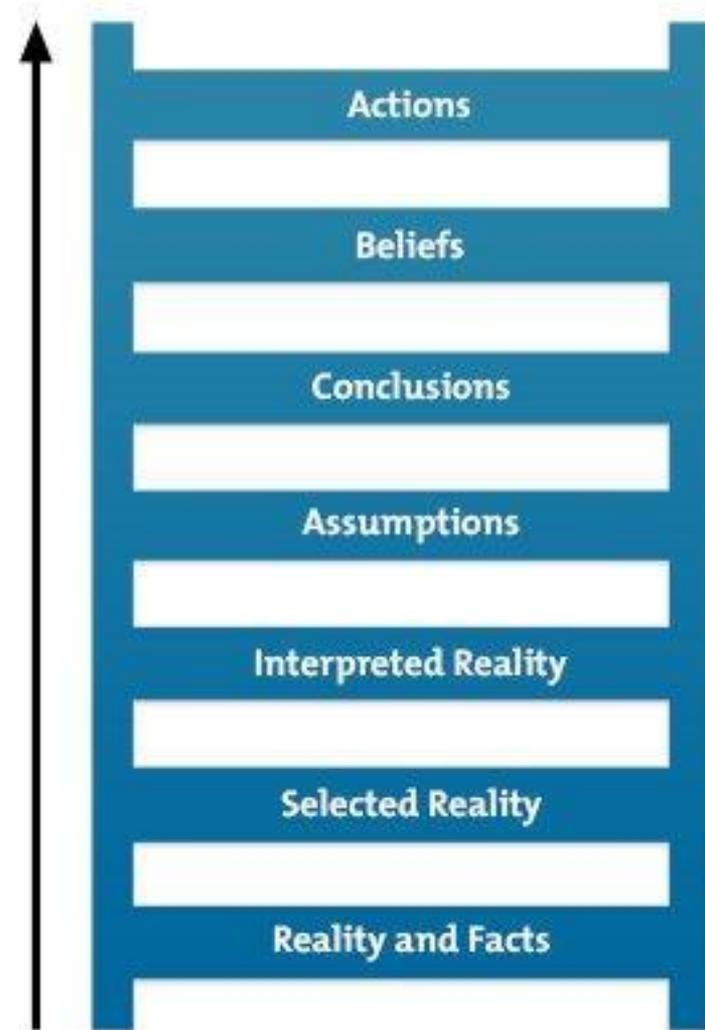
#3: Challenging people's ideas isn't a problem; it's an honor. Insulting people is a problem. Ad hominem attacks are the problem.

#4: There are protocols to this work such as:

- Welcoming multiple types of wisdom
- Not interrupting
- Making sure your questions are to the point
- Thinking before you speak
- Feeling free to pass
- Acknowledging missteps (your own and others')

# The Ladder of Inference

From [mindtools.com](http://mindtools.com)



# Life Maps Outline

- Form small groups of three (2 min)
- Draw experiences (3 min)
- Participants share (2 min per person)
- Question harvest (3 min)
- Each person answers **one** question; the group reflects back the person's answer to see if they fully understood (6 min)
- Closing conversation (5 min)

\*Crafted by Resetting the Table; used with permission

# Life Maps: Opening Instructions

1. Appoint a time-keeper (most important job ever).
2. Take a minute to think about your relationship to Israel.

Consider:

- How did your relationship begin?
- Where and how was it formed?
- Has it changed over the course of your life?

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# Life Maps: Draw Experiences

3. Now think of two or three snapshot moments from your direct experience that most powerfully shaped or formed your relationship with Israel. For each of these, please draw a picture of that moment. You'll have 3 minutes to draw.

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# Life Maps: Participants Share

4. Participants share one or two of these pivotal moments for 2 minutes each, elaborating on them in any way you'd like.
  - **Listen without interruption.** Try to hear what really matters to the speaker. Note your own reaction, but don't interrupt. As they speak, jot down a few questions you think would help you find what's most meaningful to this person.
  - **Time-keeper:** Keep time and signal people when they reach 2 minutes (let them finish their sentence).

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# Life Maps: Question Harvest

5. After each participant has shared, all participants should offer questions to other participants (individual or group) **without having people respond to them initially**. Make sure your questions reflect genuine curiosity and are not a disguised challenge. How can you better understand the stories of other participants and what matters to them? Allow 1 minute per person.

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# Life Maps: Reflect Back

6. Each participant should **answer one question** posed to them. Allow 1 minute for each participant.
7. Then, other participants should **reflect back** what they think that person was saying in their answer. The speaker should acknowledge places that the others understood exactly, partially, or not at all what they were trying to say. Allow 1 minute per participant.

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# Life Maps: Closing Conversation

8. Imagine any difficult conversation you've had as a community leader/member. (Maybe but not necessarily about Israel.)

What would be the difference between starting with presentations/facts & figures from opposing sides, and starting with life mapping? Which should be used and when?

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**Bob Blitzler**  
Chair

*Jewish Community Relations Council*



# THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING

## Civil Discourse at Home, in the Office, and Out in the Community: A Jewish Conversation

Please take a minute to fill out the evaluations that have been put on your table. It's extremely important for us to hear your feedback.

### Continue the **CONVERSATION**



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