

How To Talk about Tough Issues in a Healthy Way

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Every *machloket* (argument/conflict) which is *l'shem shamayim*
(for the sake of Heaven) is destined to endure.
And that which is not *l'shem shamayim*, is destined not to endure.
Mishna Avot 5:17

Rabbinic Judaism has always valued *makhloket*. In fact, the Talmud is filled with debate, often including the (minority) argument that wasn't chosen as law, expressly to underscore the value of hearing and respecting differing opinions. Our sages understood that debate for the right reasons, and conducted constructively, enhances Judaism. *Makhloket l'shem shamayim* remains a core tenet of Jewish thinking.

In today's complex and rapidly changing society, there is much that threatens the fabric of the communities we lead. There are myriad issues that have the power to fracture communities, and as a result, many synagogue professional and lay leaders choose to avoid discussing such issues, for fear of causing irreparable damage to their congregational communities.

Recognizing that the very avoidance of issues itself can also cause damage to communities, UJA-Federation of New York held a conference in March 2018 – *Riding the Third Rail: Leaning In To Controversy* – to provide synagogue leaders processes and skills to support the successful navigation of third rail issues.

Some of the hot-button issues that can threaten synagogues today include, but are not limited to: officiating at interfaith marriage, Israel, instruments on *Shabbat*, politics in sermons, women in lay and professional leadership, and impending Rabbinic transitions. The conference, however, didn't focus on the issues themselves, but rather on how to **constructively lean in to controversy, build resilience, and strengthen community during moments of conflict and change.**

What are the key components to a healthy process?

The following learning was gleaned from the conference panel presentation and workshops:

1. **Leaning In is proactive work.**

Constructive controversy is vital to growth and relationship building. Issues swept under the rug can fester, ultimately damaging the fabric of the congregation in ways beyond the particular issue. We strengthen community by being in relationship with one another around the difficult topics.

It is important to build both the “muscle” and the infrastructure to handle issues that will inevitably emerge. Strong relationships and connected community must be built on active listening, transparency, vulnerability and trust. Fostering and strengthening these aspects of communication is critical to ensuring healthy relationships – all sorts of relationships, both individual and communal – and all the more necessary when going through difficult moments. As Rabbi Les Bronstein shared with the audience, “Controversies will lean in to you so you might as well lean back into them!”

2. **Successful processes share critical elements.** They:

- *Are guided by Jewish values.* Studying Jewish texts together that relate to the contentious issue is critically important. Deep learning about the issue not only educates, but also allows everyone to have the same base knowledge, shared concepts and language, and grounding in the wisdom of our traditions. It is not always clear on the surface that a seemingly 21st century issue has been thought about deeply by our sages. Understanding how that ancient wisdom has relevance in current contexts can be quite powerful.
- *Provide multiple opportunities to express and hear views of all constituents* (small groups, larger community meetings, online surveys/posting). The goal is for all to feel heard, for disparate views to be respected and for all to feel they are valued members of the community – even if the decision does not ultimately go the way they prefer!
- *Showcase the rabbi's transparency.* Share his/her views alongside her/his concerns and uncertainties. Doing so will send a clear message that a decision has not already been reached by leaders, and will empower people to share their thinking, understanding that their input is genuinely sought.
- *Involve experienced facilitators with relevant expertise.* Some congregations rely primarily on internal resources; others turn to outside experts, organizations and facilitators, or a combination of both. Regardless of which route is taken, expert facilitation is both art and science; the key is to be intentional in selecting the right leaders and facilitators.
- *Follow systematic, clear steps,* with an articulated plan for deliberation, decision making and taking action. This is especially helpful when controversy emerges suddenly. It is best to have a clear system in place.
- *Are time limited.* Make enough time to do justice to the process, but with a clear timeline and end point.
- *Acknowledge the pastoral care role of the rabbi,* which is critical to the process. It's usually not the issue itself that causes strong emotions. Rather, the presenting

issue can be a reflection of deeper feelings and underlying assumptions held by individuals, and can trigger a response more powerful than what the surface might suggest.

People's passions are deeply connected to their identities. Explorations of those identities are often required through pastoral care, to help individuals more deeply understand their attachments, fear of loss and other feelings triggered by the issue at hand. It is critical for the rabbi/s to be available, and actively seek, to play this role with congregants as the communal exploration of the issue unfolds.

3. Communal processes are important opportunities to deepen relationships within the congregation and to “thicken” community connections. As a result, the successful process itself will become deeply integrated into the congregation, so that the congregation faces subsequent difficult topics with trust and transparency, using whatever framework was developed. The most successful processes are those which become ingrained in the communal culture, and are part of how the congregation engages ongoing.

4. Successful outcomes are not necessarily those which conclude with 100% consensus! Sometimes the process of learning and listening concludes with some participants parting ways with the community, understanding that there is no longer a 'good fit' with the congregation. Yet the healthy process allows this parting to happen with respect, and while often sad, without rancor or ill will. Overall, the value of listening to others, and feeling heard themselves, is the very thing that promotes understanding, connection, deep engagement, and where required, even healing.

How we participate in discussion, or conflict, *l'shem shamayim* can be an effective guiding principle in leaning in to the controversies that lean in to our congregations. Even when individuals make the choice to leave the community, they are leaving with a clear sense of *makhloket l'shem shamayim*; they are leaving with the understanding that they are in a different place than the congregation, and not because no one listened to their deeply held passion. For others, the process that promotes serious learning, deep listening and respectful discussion can result in a reaffirmation of belief in the values of the community, alignment with the decision taken, new connections and a deepening of existing connections.

Engaging in conflict for the sake of Heaven can be a profound opportunity to deepen, enrich and more closely knit a community. Don't be afraid to lean in!

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