

Jewish Community Relations Council

“Resetting the Table” on civil discourse in our community

By Daniel Pearlman, JCRC Director

An old Jewish one-liner quips, “if you ask two Jews, you’ll get three opinions.” The Toledo Jewish community is no exception. We are a vibrant community comprised of a diversity of thought.

Jewish tradition teaches us that Abraham argued with G-d and the Israelites argued with Moses. Likewise, the Talmud is full of debates. But the Talmud also teaches us that “an argument for the sake of heaven will endure; but a debate not for the sake of heaven will not endure” (Pirkei Avot, 5:17).

How does one define an argument for the sake of heaven? An argument for the sake of heaven demands the ability to actively listen. It seeks to resolve conflict by honoring both sides and employing humility in the pursuit of truth.

For emotionally charged and deeply personal topics, navigating an argument for the sake of heaven can become a daunting task. Discussing Israeli politics or certain Israeli policies can elicit strong feelings among many in our community who may feel differently from one another.

At the end of January, fifteen people representing the diversity of our Toledo Jewish community came together for an opportunity to engage in a constructive conversation around Israel. Their ages ranged from 20s to 80s and they represented a variety of different viewpoints across the political spectrum. All our synagogues had members represented, and some participants were unaffiliated. The group met twice in one week.

Jewish Community Relations Council organized this meeting in collaboration with a national civil discourse organization called Resetting the Table. In the second session, participants with opposing viewpoints began to confront their disagreements and discovered the concerns and experiences that were behind each other’s positions.

For many in attendance, this program was appreciated and needed. “The program was a great way to explore our own thoughts and opinions about Israel and learn how to better communicate and listen to others,” explained Helen Grubb. Joe Jacoby agreed. “Participating in Resetting the Table was an intense, valuable experience for me. It helped me become more aware of the ineffective ways I sometimes conversed with people whose opinions (about Israel and other issues) differ dramatically from mine. It helped me begin developing the skills I need to engage such people with greater openness to their views and connect with them despite our differences.”

These trainings helped participants explore their own thoughts about Israel while learning how to better listen to and engage with others. “The communication tools we practiced during the training sessions should help me engage in more mutually respectful dialogues, particularly on those issues in which participants may disagree,” John Glaza reflected. “I also learned of the need to assure whoever I’m speaking with that they know I’m fully listening and understanding what they are saying.”

Our community comprises diverse views on many topics, and Israeli politics and policies are no exception. Just as our tradition teaches us, we must continue to strive for civil discourse and listening before speaking.
