

JEWISH DIALOGUE GROUP



# Dialogue in the Jewish Tradition

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## I. Introduction

*In the course of a discussion about the origin of the afternoon prayer, the Talmud refers to Isaac who “went out to meditate in the field toward evening” and concludes that “meditate” must mean “to pray.” However, the Talmudic statement, “ein sichah ela tefillah,” can also mean “conversation is a form of prayer.” That is a startling and powerful idea. A genuine encounter with a human other can be a prelude to an encounter with the Divine Other. The disciplines required are the same: to be open, to listen as well as speak, to be capable of empathy and humility, to honour the other by an act of focused attention. Nor is this a minor matter. The greatest command of all, Shema Yisrael, literally means “Listen, O Israel.”*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the UK, [www.chief Rabbi.org/articles/other/jc.htm](http://www.chief Rabbi.org/articles/other/jc.htm)

The Jewish tradition teaches that dialogue is a sacred activity. There are many rich teachings about dialogue and respectful communication to be found in Jewish texts, such as the concepts of “controversy for the sake of heaven” and “guarding the tongue.” We have found that in some communities, it is useful to describe the conversations that we facilitate as a sacred endeavor or to explain the purpose and structure of the dialogue in terms of Jewish teachings.

When participants see the conversation in which they are engaged as a sacred activity, with a spiritual as well as practical purpose, it may be easier for them to be open to others. It will also help them to be patient and careful in the way that they speak. Each step of the dialogue becomes more significant, and the process itself becomes more meaningful. In addition, participants may find the structure of the dialogue less constraining and more useful when they see that it has parallels in some of Judaism’s most important teachings. Some of the communication agreements that we recommend, for example, are similar in significant ways to Jewish guidelines for avoiding harmful speech. Finally, speaking about the dialogue in religious terms can help people to experience their conversation as the newest link in a long chain of dialogues stretching back thousands of years. The participants’ work as members of a dialogue group is rooted firmly in tradition and will help to shape the future of Judaism.

We have compiled a number of Jewish texts that call on people to engage in dialogue, avoid harmful speech, and listen carefully. We have also put together some ideas about how to bring Jewish texts and traditions into your dialogues. This appendix includes:

1. a brief list of some of the ways that you can make use of Jewish teachings as a facilitator
2. a compilation of quotes from the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and more recent sources
3. interpretation of some of these texts
4. blessings and songs that participants can recite and sing when beginning or ending a dialogue

We encourage you to use these materials in any way that will be helpful for your community. You may wish to read the whole article closely or else just to skim through it and use it as reference. You need not master all of the ideas here in order to bring these materials into your dialogue. We have tried to make this document as comprehensive as possible, and we hope it is not overwhelming.

If you make use of any of these ideas, please let us know how it goes. Also, please share with us your own ideas for bringing Jewish teachings into dialogue programs. We hope to incorporate your feedback into future editions of this article. Please also feel free to contact us with any questions. Email [info@jewishdialogue.org](mailto:info@jewishdialogue.org) or write to us at: Jewish Dialogue Group, PO Box 34726, Philadelphia, PA 19101.

This article was originally published as an appendix to “Constructive Conversations about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” a guidebook for facilitating dialogue programs that bring Jews together to talk across political differences about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. The Public Conversations Project created the guidebook together with the Jewish Dialogue Group. To download or order a copy, visit [www.jewishdialogue.org](http://www.jewishdialogue.org) or [www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org).

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## II. How to Bring Jewish Teachings and Traditions into the Dialogue Process

There are several ways to bring Jewish traditions and teachings into your dialogues:

**A. Speak about the various ways that Jewish traditions value dialogue, listening, and respectful communication, using the texts and explanations presented here.** Refer to these teachings in your introductory comments or in publicity materials. You can also introduce them at other points during the dialogue. A few examples:

- In your introduction, when you explain the purpose of dialogue, you may want to mention Martin Buber's assertion that "all real living is meeting."
- In another situation, you might want to briefly tell the story of the "controversy for the sake of heaven" between Hillel and Shammai, and say that dialogue offers people a way to bring that spirit into conversations about contentious issues.
- When you explain the communication agreements, it might be useful to refer to the teachings about "guarding the tongue" or the adage "Let the honor of your neighbor be as dear to you as your own." Then explain that participants often find the agreements and the structure of the dialogue helpful in maintaining the spirit of these teachings.

**B. Hold a text study that encourages congregants to explore some of these teachings.** A list of questions for use in study sessions appears in Section IV. You may want to:

- Hold a brief discussion about one or more of the texts before beginning a dialogue series.
- Have participants read one or more of the texts cited in this article at the beginning of the dialogue session, and ask them to share their reactions in the first go-round.
- Set aside one of the meetings in a dialogue series for a full-length text study, rather than a regular session. Use whatever approach will make the group comfortable. It may work best to split people into pairs (*hevruta*) or groups of three to discuss the texts.

**C. Begin a dialogue session with a moment of silence or a *niggun*, a wordless melody, as way to create a "sacred space."**

**D. When beginning a new dialogue program, invite the participants to recite the *Shehechianu*, the traditional blessing that people say to express joy and gratitude when they see or experience something for the first time.**

**E. Close the dialogue with a song that expresses hope and gratitude, such as *Hineh Ma Tov* or *Oseh Shalom*.** You can ask the participants to suggest a song or suggest one yourself. Be careful to choose a song that people of all religious and political perspectives will appreciate.

*A note of caution:* Before deciding how or if to use these ideas in a particular dialogue program, learn as much as you can about the participants' needs and interests. Not everyone will be comfortable with traditional texts or religious rituals; secular Jews in particular may find God language alienating. Some people may simply feel confused or excluded by specific references that they don't understand. These texts and ideas can add a great deal to the dialogue, but be careful to use them in a way that is appropriate for the group.

### III. Jewish Texts That Support the Practice of Dialogue

#### A. Controversy for the Sake of Heaven

A controversy for Heaven's sake will have lasting value, but a controversy not for heaven's sake will not endure. What is an example of a controversy for Heaven's sake? The debates of Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of a controversy not for Heaven's sake? The rebellion of Korach and his associates [Numbers 16:1-3].

*Pirkei Avot 5:17 (2nd Century CE)*

For three years there was a dispute between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel, the former asserting, "The law is in agreement with our views," and the latter contending, "The law is in agreement with our views." Then a voice from heaven announced, "these and those both are the words of the living God but the law is in agreement with the rulings of the School of Hillel."

Since, however, "both are the words of the living God," what was it that entitled the School of Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they taught their own rulings as well as those of the School of Shammai, and even more, they taught the rulings of the School of Shammai before their own. This should teach you that one who humbles oneself is exalted by the Holy One and one who exalts oneself is humbled by the Holy One.

*Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin, 13b (7th Century CE)*

Why do we record the non-accepted opinions of the schools of Hillel and Shammai? To teach future generations that one need not demand that only one's own way is correct, for our forebears did not do so. Why then do we record the minority opinion of one as opposed to the majority opinion of all the rest, given that the majority decides? So that a future court might have reference to them, and rule thereby.

*Mishna, Eduyot I: 4-5 (2nd Century CE)*

Even father and son, master and disciple, who study Torah at the same gate become enemies of each other; yet they do not stir from there until they come to love each other.

*Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 30b (7th Century CE)*

Controversy has the quality of creating the world. For the beginning of creation was by means of the vacant space, since otherwise all would be Infinity and there would be no room for creating the world. Therefore He withdrew the light to two sides, providing the vacant space, within which He created all that was created through words.

The same applies to controversies. For if all the sages were of one mind, there would be no room for creating the world. It is only by virtue of their controversies, each taking himself to one side, that a quality of vacant space is provided between them...

For all the words each of them speaks are all for the sake of creating the world, which they effect within the vacant spaces between them. For the sages create everything through their words...but they must be careful not to speak too much.

*Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, Likutei Moharan (early 19th Century CE)*

## Interpretation of the Texts

The Jewish tradition calls upon people to participate in the collective work of making sense of the world both by contributing their ideas and judgments and by listening openly and carefully to the ideas of others. Seeking truth is a sacred task, and one needs to listen as well as speak in order to pursue that task in the fullest way possible. No one can know the entire truth, and the mark of a wise person is that he or she values and understands alternative views. Jewish traditions call on us to offer our ideas with passion and conviction, but always to recognize our limitations and to seek understanding of other views.

One of the most important texts in the entire Jewish tradition, the Talmud, represents a collective effort by several generations of Rabbis to interpret the Torah—to understand the traditions, to determine how to act in the world, and to examine ethical, moral, and political questions through the framework of the Torah. The idea that certain kinds of controversy can be positive is integral to the Talmud. While the discussions and arguments that are recorded in the Talmud are not “dialogues” in the exact way that we use that word now, they still embody many of the same values that the modern idea of dialogue holds. They represent a very specific kind of controversy—controversy in which people seek truth collectively and try to find ways to live together, rather than seeking simply to win; controversy in which each person listens to the other in order to understand, and not merely to refute.

The Talmud provides a model for positive controversy and a number of lessons about how to conduct it. Some of the lessons we can derive from the Talmud are:

- Pay attention to both majority and minority opinions.
- Listen carefully to other perspectives.
- Recognize that in dealing with ethical matters, no one person possesses the whole truth. Seek truth collectively.
- Assert your perspective, but always be humble and open. Listen carefully to other perspectives. Learn from them and let them influence your own.
- Share your uncertainties and questions as well as your conclusions.
- Positive controversy seeks a way to live together ethically, not just to win.
- Don't be afraid to explore your disagreements, even if it is painful.
- Be willing to share and examine the assumptions behind your conclusions.
- Posing good questions is as important as proposing answers.
- Engage with people whose perspectives seem totally different from your own as well as people who appear to share your basic assumptions.

These guidelines for dealing with controversy are articulated in many different places in the Talmud. Below, we will concentrate on three of the most telling of these Talmudic texts:

1. “Controversy for Heaven’s Sake”
2. “These and these are both the words of the living God.”
3. “Why do we record the minority opinion?”

In part four, we will consider how the Talmud addresses the question of how we should respond to perspectives that seem opposed to our own in ways that are dangerous or threatening. We will address this question through two quotes.

Finally, in part five, we will examine the role that asking questions plays in the Talmud and in the Jewish tradition as a whole. The conversations that are found in the Talmud begin with questions rather than assertions. Asking good questions is an essential part of “controversy for the sake of heaven” and an essential part of dialogue.

## **1. Controversy for Heaven’s Sake**

*A controversy for Heaven’s sake will have lasting value, but a controversy not for heaven’s sake will not endure. What is an example of a controversy for Heaven’s sake? The debates of Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of a controversy not for Heaven’s sake? The rebellion of Korach and his associates. (Pirkei Avot 5:17)*

This text is explicit that controversy produces results that are of value, when it is motivated by a desire for real communication. Throughout the Talmud, Hillel and Shammai are presented as antagonists in issues of Jewish law. If Hillel says one thing, Shammai says another. Why is there all this controversy? Why does this sacred text not simply tell us what to believe, but instead record two different opinions on almost everything? The text states that the controversy itself is of value. The search for truth—and the dialogues, arguments, and debates that we undertake together as part of that search—is itself the point. When people explore their disagreements and compare their different perspectives, they come closer to the truth. As such, any controversy that is motivated by the search for truth is a sacred act.

The Talmud recognizes that disagreement can be painful, but explains that when it takes place as part of a sacred controversy, it produces good results. While sacred controversy may at first push people apart, it draws them back together in the end if they see the process through: “Even father and son, master and disciple, who study Torah at the same gate become enemies of each other; yet they do not stir from there until they come to love each other.” (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 30b)

The Rabbis contrast this controversy for the sake of heaven with the manipulative use of argument to pursue personal gain, as in the story of Korach. Korach is a figure in the book of Numbers who challenges the authority of Moses and Aaron and initiates a rebellion. When Moses calls on Korach and his followers to sit down and talk with him, they refuse, replying simply, “We will not go up.” The text depicts Korach as a self-interested demagogue, and his challenge as the paradigm of useless, destructive controversy. Some say that Korach’s primary transgression was in his utter refusal to dialogue. He uses polemical language to split the community and to gain power for himself. He does not engage in a substantive conversation about the needs and interests of the community or about how it should be led, and he refuses explicitly to meet with his opponents.

## **2. These and These are Both the Words of the Living God**

*For three years there was a dispute between School of Shammai and the School of Hillel, the former asserting, “The law is in agreement with our views,” and the latter contending, “The law is in agreement with our views.” Then a voice from heaven announced, “these and those both are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of the School of Hillel.”*

*Since, however, “both are the words of the living God,” what was it that entitled the School of Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they taught their own rulings as well as those of the School of Shammai, and even more, they taught the rulings of the School of Shammai before their own. This should teach you that one who humbles oneself is exalted by the Holy One and one who exalts oneself is humbled by the Holy One. (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin, 13b)*

This text says something radical that may surprise: on the topic of many debates, God does not have a preference. In the context of the Talmud, this means that on a theoretical level, there is not necessarily a “right” and a “wrong” to most debates. Perhaps this sentence could be translated in a secular voice to read “both these perspectives and these perspectives are equal ethically.” Two different opinions can both, in theory, be right! However, this is not the end of this text. This text goes on to say, “The law is in agreement with the rulings of the School of Hillel.” In the world of the Talmud, even though multiple opinions of law could be right in theory, in practice, one law was thought needed for a society to live by.

In situations of controversy today, we often find that each person has truth on his or her side, but that in order to live together, we need to make certain agreements and decide our communal rules. If we bring the tradition of Controversy for the Sake of Heaven into our own lives, we see that the decisions and arrangements we reach together should reflect the part of the truth that each person holds. Dialogue gives us a way to make sure that each person understands the piece of truth that each other person holds.

The Talmud explains further, “What was it that entitled the School of Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they taught their own rulings as well as those of the School of Shammai, and even more, they taught the rulings of the School of Shammai before their own.”

Commentators have offered many different interpretations of this passage. Rabbi Benjamin Hecht, a contemporary commentator in Toronto offers a beautiful interpretation of this passage that may be especially useful for people engaged in dialogue:

*We are called upon by G-d to enter the realm of Divine thought and to voice our convictions, our thoughts and ideas. Yet, simultaneously, as we recognize this supreme faith that G-d has placed in us, we are also called upon to recognize our own limitations...*

*T.B. Eruvin 13b states that the reason the law was codified according to Beit Hillel was because they, in their expression of Torah, always quoted Beit Shammai first. In that simple act, Bet Hillel declared this very concept and, so, established their prominence for the generations. Their recognition of their own human limit did not prevent them from defending their view, for so Torah also demands. Yet, by quoting Beit Shammai first, Beit Hillel understood their full place within Torah. Another's opinion must be heard, recognized and respected-not just as an act of tolerance-for this very process of hearing, recognizing and respecting powerfully changes the actual nature of one's opinion and one's Torah. Lfi aniyat da'ati [according to the poverty of my thought]-this is what I think but I know of variant thought and it all lies within the realm of Torah; thus, a recognition of the awesomeness of Torah, of the Divine Wisdom, is born-and affects what I think. One who is certain that his opinion is absolutely correct and represents the entire allowed spectrum of Torah, ultimately establishes his opinion as outside the realm of Torah for the parameters of this person's Torah are those solely of man; he cannot touch the Divine that extends beyond him. ([www.nishma.org/articles/insight/spark5756-5.html](http://www.nishma.org/articles/insight/spark5756-5.html))*

No one person can fully comprehend the Torah or have sole possession of the truth, but we can each contribute to humanity's collective understanding by speaking and listening carefully. We can contribute in an especially useful way by paying close attention to alternative perspectives and learning from them as we formulate our conclusions. (Many people consider the type of humility that Rabbi Hecht describes, *anava*, to be a key Jewish value.) The same might be said about the scientific method, or about the use of dialogue to talk through controversial issues. Each of these endeavors calls us on speak boldly, but also to listen and remain open and humble.

### 3. Why then do we record the minority opinion?

*Why do we record the non-accepted opinions of the schools of Hillel and Shammai? To teach future generations that one need not demand that only one's own way is correct, for our forebears did not do so. Why then do we record the minority opinion of one as opposed to the majority opinion of all the rest, given that the majority decides? So that a future court might have reference to them, and rule thereby. (Mishna, Eduyot I: 4-5)*

The Talmud records the Rabbis' conversations and debates about a wide range of questions and, at every point, it describes both the majority and the minority opinion. The basic structure of the text embodies a respect for diversity of views and open discussion.

This text offers two reasons for recording dissenting views: The Rabbis of the Talmudic era recognized that even though a particular argument did not win majority support, it might still be very important, and they wanted future generations to be able to draw on the wisdom that minority perspectives contained. They expected that rabbinical courts in the future would consider the reasoning and the ideas that are found in dissenting opinions when issuing rulings of their own. Future generations would study majority and minority opinions with equal attention.

In addition, the Rabbis wanted to show future generations how important it was to be open to alternative perspectives and open to changing one's own mind. By recording both majority and minority opinions, they were showing future generations that "one need not demand that only one's own way is correct." By constructing the Talmud in this way, they provided an example of open-mindedness for future generations to follow.

### 4. Talking With "The Other"

The Talmudic concept of "controversy for the sake of heaven" provides us with some useful guidelines for conducting dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other issues, but it also raises some important questions: Who should be part of the conversation? How should we relate to people whose perspectives seem dangerous or threatening to us? When should we listen to and talk with someone, and when should we avoid them?

A number of contemporary commentators point out that the conversations recorded in the Talmud represent a particular subset of Jewish thinkers of the period, namely the Rabbis—those leaders who had membership in the academy and who fit into the emerging Orthodoxy. With a few exceptions, no one else was considered to be a legitimate interpreter of the Torah or included in making decisions about Jewish law. The Talmud largely excludes the voices of women and commoners, and it rejects the views of people who were deemed to be heretics. There are many passages that tell us explicitly to ignore and even to stamp out the words of heretics, depicting these outside perspectives as threatening the integrity of the tradition. One such passage argues:

*The writings of the heretics deserve to be burned, even though the holy name of God occurs therein, for paganism is less dangerous than heresy; the former fails to recognize the truth of Judaism from want of knowledge, but the latter denies what it fully knows. (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat, 116a)*

The Talmudic story of Rabbi Meir and Elisha ben Abuya presents an alternative perspective on this issue, however. Elisha ben Abuya represents the archetypal figure of the unbeliever in the Talmud. Once a great Rabbi, he loses his faith and becomes an atheist and an exponent of Greek philosophy. He is ejected from the rabbinate and officially shunned. The Talmud often refers to him simply as "The Other," *Acher*. Nevertheless, he remains engaged with the Jewish community, and the Talmud depicts a tender

relationship between him and Rabbi Meir, one of the most important sages and legal authorities in the entire text. Rabbi Meir was Rabbi Elisha's student in his youth, and he continues to study with Elisha after he becomes an apostate. Rabbi Meir tries to convince Elisha to repent, but he also continues to learn from him, as we see in the following passage:

*The rabbis taught: It happened that The Other was riding upon his horse on the Sabbath, Rabbi Meir was walking behind him to learn the Law from his mouth. He said to him: Meir, turn backwards, for I have already measured by means of my horse's hoofs up to this point the legal limit of traveling on the Sabbath. He [Meir] answered him: You should also return. He [The Other] said to him: And have I not already answered you what I have heard from behind the curtain? [Elisha had been signaled by God that he could not repent, and therefore it would not matter if he returned or continued riding.] (Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah, 14b-15b)*

Rabbi Meir even brings Elisha ben Abuya to teach his students. Although Elisha is excluded from decision-making, Rabbi Meir still respects and listens to him and considers his views important to understand. Although their conversations include a great deal of debate and attempts to convince, they are also characterized by mutual care, genuine respect, and listening.

The story of Rabbi Meir and Elisha ben Abuya exemplifies two important elements of dialogue: First, it is possible, and useful, to engage in dialogue with people who disagree with us in fundamental ways. In fact, when we are tempted to think of someone as "The Other," it may be especially important to engage that person in dialogue. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and a constant advocate of dialogue, argues in his book *The Dignity of Difference* that "we must learn the art of conversation, from which truth emerges...by the process of letting our world be enlarged by the presence of others who think, act, and interpret reality in ways radically different from our own." (p. 23)

Second, dialogue is a separate process from decision-making. When we engage in dialogue, our immediate purpose is not to reach agreement or solutions, although we may find through dialogue that those goals are feasible. Our immediate goal is simply to learn about the other person, to help him or her to learn about us, and reflect on our own ideas, questions, and dilemmas. In this story, the differences between Rabbi Meir and Elisha ben Abuya are so great that they cannot fully share the same community, cannot live according to the same guidelines. Compromise seems impossible. Nevertheless, they find useful ways to talk with each other, and both gain from their dialogue.

## 5. Asking Questions

*[During the Passover Seder] they pour the second cup of wine, and here the child asks the father. But if the child lacks knowledge, the father teaches him: "How different this night is from all other nights!" (Mishna Pesachim, 10:4)*

"Controversy for the sake of heaven" requires people to ask good questions as well as offering and listening to ideas. The practice of asking questions is central to the Jewish tradition, and questions play an important part in many Jewish texts and rituals. Questions are also an essential element of dialogue.

The conversations that are recorded in the Talmud begin with questions, not with assertions. Some commentators argue that the wisdom of the text is found as much in the questions as in the responses. This practice is carried on today. When people study Talmud together using the traditional method, they pose questions to one another as a way to explore the text from a variety of different angles. In Hebrew, a Torah scholar is known as a "*Talmid Chacham*," a wise student, a questioner, someone who is dedicated to asking and learning, not simply as a "*Chacham*," or a wise person.

The commentaries on the Torah known as “Midrash” generally begin with questions as well. Jewish thinkers over the centuries have created a vast body of stories, parables, homilies, and analyses that respond to a wide range of questions about the text. Just as the Talmud presents multiple views about each question it addresses, the Midrashic literature offers a wide range of responses to the various questions it takes up. These various interpretations both complement and conflict with each other. “Midrash” literally means seeking or inquiry. The process of Midrash continues today as people pose new questions and rethink old questions, writing new Midrashim in each generation.

Translations of the *Chumash*, the first five books of the Torah, generally list a variety of interpretations of each verse, drawing on the classical Midrashim and other commentaries. They do not rank or attempt to reconcile these interpretations. The multiple questions and answers enrich and complicate each other, and together they invite the reader to question and challenge the text him- or herself.

We are reminded of the importance of asking questions in an especially striking way during the Passover Seder. Children are encouraged to ask questions of the older generation, and the telling of the Passover story does not begin until questions have been posed. Even if someone is celebrating a Seder alone, he or she is required to ask questions. In a recent sermon about the role of questioning in the Jewish tradition, Rabbi Janet Marder notes that the text from the Mishna that is quoted above suggests that it is ideal for children to generate questions of their own during the Seder, rather than simply reciting the familiar questions that are recorded in the Haggadah: “The traditional four questions are only there as a fallback, a substitute, if the child does not generate questions on his or her own.” Rabbi Marder continues:

*Questions are the quintessential Jewish mode of language. The Seder, set up to encourage the asking of questions, is just one example of a cultural system specifically designed to create inquiring minds... The goal is not a one-sided monologue in which content is poured from older vessels into new ones, but lively intergenerational conversation. Through dialogue connections are strengthened; each partner contributes something essential and both come to a better understanding of the other. Finally, questions are a crucial element of the Seder because questions symbolize what it is to be free.* (www.betham.org/sermons/marder040409.html)

Questions play a critical role in dialogue of all kinds, including the structured type of dialogue that we describe in this manual. Facilitators spend a great deal of time crafting or selecting opening questions for the participants, and participants are encouraged to think carefully and creatively about questions they would like to ask one another. The structure of the dialogue makes it safe enough for people to pose questions that they might otherwise be unable to articulate and to answer questions that might otherwise seem threatening. When dialogue participants pose questions, they can learn about each other and explore critical issues in ways that might not be possible without this structure.

## **B. Guarding One's Speech**

Death and life are in the power of the tongue.

*Proverbs 18:21*

Do not go about as a talebearer among your people.

*Leviticus 19:16*

One can speak [and it is] like the piercing of a sword, but the tongue of the wise is a healing.

*Proverbs 12:18*

You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God.

*Leviticus 25:17*

This verse prohibits committing a verbal wrong, that one should not needlessly hurt his fellow, nor give him inappropriate advice that is self-serving to the advisor.

*Rashi's commentary on Leviticus 25:17 (11th Century CE)*

Whoever shames his neighbor in front of others, is like one who sheds blood.

*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 58b (7th Century CE)*

Therefore, you must not say: "Since I have been put to shame, so I will put others to shame." Rabbi Tanhuma said: "If you do so, know Whom you put to shame [as the verse states]: 'In the likeness of God, He made him [the first Adam]' (Genesis 5:1)"

*Genesis Rabbah 24:7 (6th Century CE)*

One who rebukes his friend—whether concerning matters that are between them, or whether concerning matters between him and God—must do so in private, speaking to him calmly and with soft speech.

*Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot 6:7 (12th Century CE)*

Just as one is commanded to say that which will be heeded, so is one commanded not to say that which will not be heeded. Rabbi Abba said: It is an obligation [not to rebuke]. As it is said: "Do not rebuke a scorner, lest he hate you; rebuke a wise person and he will love you." [Proverbs 9:8]

*Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 65b (7th Century CE)*

A person's tongue is more powerful than one's sword. A sword can kill someone who is nearby; a tongue can cause the death of someone who is far away.

*Babylonian Talmud, Arachin 15b (7th Century CE)*

Evil speech [*Lashon Hara*] kills three people: the speaker, the listener, and the subject.

*Pirkei Avot 2:1 (2nd Century CE)*

Rabbi Eliezer said: “Let the honor of your neighbor be as dear to you as your own. Be not easily moved to anger.”

*Pirkei Avot 2:15 (2nd Century CE)*

Ben Zoma said, “Who is honored? One who honors all God’s creatures.”

*Pirkei Avot 4:1 (2nd Century CE)*

But the stranger that lives with you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

*Leviticus 19:33*

Don’t separate yourself from the community, don’t be sure of yourself until the day you die, don’t judge another man until you are in his position, don’t say anything that cannot be readily understood in the hope that eventually it will be understood...

*Pirkei Avot 2:5 (2nd Century CE)*

Judge every person with extra merit in their favor.

*Pirkei Avot 1:6 (2nd Century CE)*

If you see a person who speaks well of their companion, know that the ministering angels also speak of this person’s merit before the Holy Blessed One.

*Midrash Mishle (date uncertain: mostly likely compiled between 8th and 11th Century)*

The world exists only for the sake of people who, in the midst of disputes, suppress their instincts.

*Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 89a (7th Century CE)*

One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and one who rules his spirit than one who takes a city.

*Proverbs, 16:32*

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: “A procession of angels pass before each person, and the heralds go before them, saying, ‘Make way for the image of God!’”

*Midrash, Deuteronomy Rabbah, 4:4 (10th Century CE)*

Teach your tongue to say, “I do not know,” lest you be led to lie.

*Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 4a (7th Century CE)*

## Interpretation of the Texts

Because speech has great power, our tradition includes a category of ethics labeled *Shmirat HaLashon*. This concept can be translated as “guarding the tongue” or “awareness of what you say.” Under its heading is also *Lashon Hara*—the concept of being careful of negative speech (the “evil tongue”), especially gossip about others. In many of the above texts, words even hold the power of life and death. Traditionally, verbal wrongs done to one another have been given greater weight than any other harm. The “*Al Chet*” confession that is recited on Yom Kippur enumerates forty-three different sins; of those, eleven are sins committed through speech. This section elaborates on several aspects of Jewish speech ethics and related teachings that are especially relevant to people engaged in dialogue.

Central to Jewish speech ethics is the idea that what we say has consequences and that it is not always possible to revoke what has already been said. To defame someone or to shame him is considered a grievous harm, which cannot be easily rectified. In debate, many people use speech in these ways. Dialogue offers us the opportunity to use our words for good—to draw closer to one another instead of dividing us. Several of the general guidelines that we can adopt from the concept of “Guarding the Tongue” are:

- Be careful not to cause harm to others through words, including both people to whom you speak and those about whom you speak.
- Be careful not to cause harm to yourself through words.
- Speech is very powerful—use it wisely and carefully.
- Be aware of the positive impact of words.

We examine a few key concepts in more detail below:

1. Treat everyone with respect and compassion.
2. Be careful when expressing disagreement or distress.
3. Ask questions rather than making negative assumptions.
4. Do not exaggerate what you know.

In Section 5, we offer some suggestions about ways to put these ideas into practice, even when it seems difficult.

### 1. Treat Everyone with Respect and Compassion

The Jewish tradition includes a number of teachings about the importance of honoring each person: “Let the honor of your neighbor be as dear to you as your own.” (Pirke Avot 2:15) In all of our actions, including our speech, we should pay as much attention to other people’s honor as to our own. One of the key values in Jewish tradition, *kavod ha’briyot*, “the dignity of created beings,” reminds us that each human life is worthy of care at all times. Each person is created in the image of God, *b’tzelem elohim*, and we should avoid causing anyone to experience unnecessary suffering. Throughout Jewish texts we are called upon to respect and honor those who are different from us, as well as those who are similar. The Torah calls on us on thirty-six different occasions to “love the stranger.” This mitzvah is mentioned more frequently than any other.

The texts call upon us not merely to avoid harming people, but to practice *chesed*, kindness and compassion. A well-known quote from the Talmud reminds us:

*Consider the Torah! There is a deed of loving-kindness at its beginning and a deed of loving-kindness at its end. Loving-kindness at its beginning: "The Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skins and clothed them." [Genesis 3:21]. Loving-kindness at its end: "And He buried [Moses] in the valley" [Deuteronomy 34:6] (Babylonian Talmud, Sota 14a)*

The most well-known codification of Jewish speech ethics is found in the 1873 book *Sefer Chafetz Chaim*, by Polish rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen Kagan. This text details a number of guidelines about what can be said and not said in a wide variety of situations. It calls on us to avoid talking about other people in any way that will be derogatory or damaging to anyone, physically, financially, socially, or by inducing stress. It also tells us to avoid talking about others in a way that generates animosity between people.

In structured dialogue, the participants generally agree to "speak for ourselves and our own experience," and to avoid representing the views of others, either other participants or people not present in the conversation. Some groups adopt a strict interpretation of the prohibition on *Lashon HaRa* and agree to avoid talking about anyone who is not present during the dialogue session, while other groups simply agree to extend the same respect to people outside of the room that they have promised to one another. Dialogue groups generally also commit to "confidentiality," agreeing not to share any participant's comments with people outside the group.

## **2. Be Careful When Expressing Disagreement or Distress**

According to Jewish tradition, we should be especially careful to treat people with respect and gentleness when we criticize something they have done. Further, we have an obligation to rebuke other people in such a way that we will be heard. There are a number of teachings that point out that if we know someone will not be able to learn from a criticism that we want to offer, and that our words will only cause hurt or anger, it is better not to criticize.

Commenting on verse from Proverbs (9:8), "Do not rebuke a scorner, lest he hate you; rebuke a wise person and he will love you," Rabbi Ela in the Talmud says that: "[j]ust as one is commanded to say that which will be heeded, so is one commanded not to say that which will not be heeded." (Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 65b) This directive can be understood in two ways. Some commentators read the text to mean that we should not criticize someone if he or she is not open to hearing our criticism. Other commentators point out that the text can tell us how to offer criticism, not simply when to offer it. When we offer criticism, we should treat people as though they are wise, and not as though they are scoffers or fools:

*When giving rebuke, don't just point out faults, thereby making the person feel like a [scoffer]. Also emphasize the positive qualities, make the person feel like a [wise person], and he will accept your rebuke and love you. (Rabbi Yisroel Ciner, [www.torah.org/learning/parsha-insights/5758/achareimos.html](http://www.torah.org/learning/parsha-insights/5758/achareimos.html))*

In structured dialogue, participants agree not to criticize one another's views, but simply to state when they disagree with something or when something disturbs them. This guideline is somewhat different from the guidelines found in Jewish texts, but it reflects many of the same values and has many of the same effects.

### **3. Ask Questions Rather Than Making Negative Assumptions**

Jewish tradition also teaches that we should be careful not to prejudge people, especially not to assume that they are motivated by negative intentions. In fact, we are called upon to “judge every person with extra merit in their favor,” to give people the benefit of the doubt and to look for what is understandable about their actions. This teaching has direct relevance to dialogue. In dialogue sessions, facilitators sometimes remind the participants:

*It can be especially useful to ask a question when someone has said something that disturbed you and when you find yourself making assumptions about that person. Rather than simply reacting, ask that person a question so that you can understand their ideas, feelings, motivations, or experience better.*

This practice requires us to suspend negative judgments and to assume that there is something worth understanding in each person.

### **4. Do Not Exaggerate What You Know**

The Talmud reminds us to guard against speech that exaggerates our knowledge: “Teach your tongue to say, “I do not know,” lest you be led to lie.” (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 4a) The temptation to overstate what we know can be very strong. When we are in conflict with someone, we may be tempted to express undue certainty about a particular issue so that we can win an argument. At other times, we may find ourselves claiming more knowledge or more certainty than we really possess in order to impress someone or convince them to act in a way that serves our interests. In some cases, exaggerating what we know may simply be a way to shore up our own sense of identity or security. When we cannot or do not admit to uncertainty, we sometimes end up lying, often without even realizing that we are doing so. Our words may mislead people in ways that are very harmful.

It can be very difficult to hold back from claiming more knowledge than we have. The text directs us not merely to avoid exaggeration, but also to say explicitly when we do not know something, thereby counteracting this tendency with a deliberate, positive action.

### **5. Putting These Ideas into Practice**

The Jewish tradition recognizes the commitment and effort involved in living according to these values, and provides several teachings that can help people to do so:

First, there are a number of teachings about the importance of self-awareness and self-restraint. In the midst of dispute, we should remember to suppress some of our instincts. At every moment, each of us is pulled simultaneously towards both constructive and hurtful actions. The impulse to strike back at another person or to try to convince them just makes us human. Paying close attention to the feelings that arise in us as we talk with someone allows us to deliberately choose the feelings we want to act upon.

Second, in order to honor someone, we need to listen carefully to that person. The act of listening itself demonstrates respect and care. Furthermore, when we listen to other people, we can learn about their needs, ideas, and concerns, and then take those things into account in all of our actions. Listening to people enables us to discover the proper way to speak to them. Without listening, we will not know how to guard our tongues. The discussion of the *Shema* in the next session describes more about this concept.

Third, external standards of behavior can help guide our actions, since it can be hard to know in the moment what would be best. Jewish law sets forth a detailed set of rules about what we can say and what

we must not say in a variety of different circumstances. Traditional Jews often accept all of these rules as binding, while some Jews simply look to them for guidance. In dialogue, we suggest a simpler set of guidelines. Some of these guidelines closely parallel rules about communication that are found in Jewish law, while others are quite different.

Finally, it is important to remind ourselves that the person we are talking with is worthy of absolute respect. When we disagree fundamentally with someone, a short meditation or silent prayer may help to generate a sense of respect for that person. In a recent Yom Kippur sermon, Rabbi Elliot Strom recommended to his congregation that they call to mind a beautiful image from a commentary on *Pirkei Avot* when they engage in difficult conversations:

*My friends, there is a beautiful Hasidic teaching that before every human being comes a retinue of angels, announcing: "Make way for the image of the Holy One Blessed be He. Make way for the image of God." [Midrash, Deuteronomy Rabbah, 4:4] It's easy to remember this teaching when we look into the eyes of a newborn baby. It's harder-ininitely harder-to keep in mind when in the middle of angry debate. But that is exactly why it is so very necessary. Because, in the end, we can argue and disagree, but ultimately, we must never forget that every human being-even those who oppose us and oppose us fiercely-are children of a loving God just like us.*  
([www.shiraminow.org/clergy\\_2004\\_09\\_24\\_2.htm](http://www.shiraminow.org/clergy_2004_09_24_2.htm))

### C. Listening and Dialogue

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God the Lord is One.

*Deuteronomy 6:4*

The Eternal God has taught me how to speak, even to those tired of speech. Morning by morning God awakens me, awakens my ear: teaching me to listen.

*Isaiah 50:4*

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven...a time to keep silent and a time to speak.

*Ecclesiastes 3:1 - 3.7*

Ben Zoma said, "Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone, as it is said [in Psalms 119:99]: 'From all who would teach me, I have gained understanding.'"

*Pirkei Avot 4:1 (2nd Century CE)*

Ben Azzai taught: Do not disdain any person, do not underrate the importance of anything, for there is no person who does not have their hour and there is nothing without a function.

*Pirkei Avot 4:3 (2nd Century CE)*

Torah is acquired by means of 48 qualities [some of] which are attentive listening, articulate speech, intuitive understanding...deliberation...asking and answering, listening and contributing to the discussion...

*Pirkei Avot 6:6 (2nd Century CE)*

Happy is the generation in which the leaders listen to their followers...

*Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashana 25a (7th Century CE)*

The primary word I-Thou can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become I, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting.

*Martin Buber, I and Thou (1923 CE)*

Only he who himself turns to the other human being and opens himself to him receives the world in him. Only the being whose otherness, accepted in my being, lives and faces me in the whole compression of existence brings the radiance of eternity to me. Only when two say to one another with all that they are "It is Thou," is the indwelling of the Present Being between them.

*Martin Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 30 (1947 CE)*

## Interpretation of the Texts

Listening and dialogue hold a central place in much of Jewish practice and theology. To experience the sacred and to bring holiness into the world requires that we remain open to the people around us, to the Divine voice, and to everything that we see and hear. The texts listed here describe several different ways that Jewish tradition directs us to listen and to engage in dialogue. We will offer further explanation of four of them:

1. The *Shema*, the central statement in Jewish worship
2. The directive to “learn from everyone” that is found in the Talmud
3. The prophet Isaiah’s statement about learning from God to listen and speak
4. Martin Buber’s declaration that “all real living is meeting”

### 1. The *Shema*

The *Shema*, one of the most important statements in Jewish worship, begins with the command, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” This text tells us not to simply passively hear, but to listen actively.

To whom are we told to listen? We listen to ourselves, to other people, or to the Divine voice, all saying the same thing: that there is a unity in the world; that we are all tied together at our source. There is an ultimate oneness, to which we all testify. This ultimate unity does not deny the difference in our experience. “Do not be confused by the many voices you hear; remember they all come from the one God” (Pesikta D’Rav Kahuna). Many Jews think of God as a force which is found in each of us; therefore in listening to and showing regard for each other, we are listening to and showing regard for God.

Further, this directive enables us to act in way that brings sacredness into the world. Hillel famously says in the Talmud that the entire Torah can be summed up in the commandment “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a) Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, Executive Director of the Tufts University Hillel, points out that the directive to listen gives us a practical, specific way to carry out this difficult commandment:

*Listening is a prerequisite for love, which is why, I think, the Shema is followed by the words, “and you shall love/V’ahavta.” First listen, then you build the connections that enable you to love. While the text...goes on to talk about loving God, the rabbis were much more interested in how you loved other people. Now, the rabbis weren’t naïve. They recognized that you can’t command emotion and you certainly can’t love every person you meet. So they translated love into action: Be exquisitely sensitive to the other human beings around you, their physical needs, their feelings, the quality of their lives. Be so connected to the people around you that you try to see the world through their eyes, where their happiness becomes your happiness, where you can’t sleep well, if you do nothing, while others go to bed hungry.*  
([www.tuftshillel.org/jl-rab05-celebrating25years.htl.htm](http://www.tuftshillel.org/jl-rab05-celebrating25years.htl.htm))

### 2. Learn From Everyone

The book of Pirkei Avot in the Talmud reminds us, “Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone, as it is said ‘From all who would teach me, I have gained understanding.’” Jewish tradition places a supreme value on study and understanding. While some commentators interpret this to mean only study of

particular texts, others have a more expansive view. All of creation is sacred, and we should learn as much as we can about our world, the people around us, and ourselves. Each person has something to teach us, and we should “not disdain any person” nor “underrate the importance of anything.”

Together with the other teachings about humility and listening that are cited above, this teaching encourages us to cultivate our curiosity and to develop a rigorous intellectual discipline. These texts remind us not to be utterly convinced of our views, not to oversimplify, always to be open to new ways of looking at an issue. There are many kinds of knowledge, each important in its own way. Some people may be able to share expert analysis, others first-hand stories, moral judgments, useful insights, challenges, or questions.

At times, we may find ourselves rejecting what someone says automatically, assuming that because we disagree with someone, we have nothing to learn from them. The people with whom we disagree most strongly, however, may have the most to teach us. At other times we may not disagree with someone strongly, but simply assume that he or she has little useful information to offer about the issue at hand. Often, however, we will find that listening can shed light on the various ways that people understand the issue and the dilemmas they are grappling with. These teachings underscore the importance of listening to find value in what each person says. If we find ourselves disregarding someone, we should remind ourselves to listen more carefully and with greater curiosity.

Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, also known as the Maharal, elaborates on this teaching in an important Sixteenth Century text:

*For the love of research and knowledge, it is advisable that one should not reject anything that contradicts his view. This holds especially true for [an interlocutor] who does not intend to provoke...but to honestly declare his beliefs. Even if these are counter to our beliefs and our religion, it is not proper to say to him, “Speak not, say nothing,” for by doing so there will result no clarification of religious beliefs. On the contrary, [one should say,] “speak up...as much as you wish...” For if one prevents the other from speaking, he thereby reveals the weakness of [one’s own] religious position... Such is the proper manner in which to establish the truth: to hear their arguments which they hold [truthfully] and not merely to provoke. Therefore it is not right to dismiss the words of one’s opponent, but to draw him close and look [carefully] into his words. (Be’er ha-Golah, 7, p. 151)*

### **3. Learning to Listen and Learning to Speak**

*The Eternal God has taught me how to speak, even to those tired of speech. Morning by morning God awakens me, awakens my ear: teaching me to listen. (Isaiah 50:4)*

The verse from Isaiah illustrates the intimate connection between speaking and listening, and it offers us several lessons. Isaiah, a prophet whom God has sent to give a message to the nation of Israel, is wise enough to pray for the ability to listen as well as the ability to speak. Isaiah realizes that he must listen to people if he is to speak effectively.

Only when people feel heard are they truly able to hear the message that we might bring them. Many people today, as well as in Isaiah’s time, are “tired of speech.” They may suffer from information overload, since they are constantly asked to take in and evaluate messages and arguments of all different kinds. This can be exhausting, causing them to stop paying attention, even to people who are close to them.

In addition, people often find themselves tired of speech when they are experiencing cynicism, anger, or despair. Words have not helped them to find clarity, peace, or hope, and they no longer want to listen. In the book of Isaiah, for example, the prophet addresses the Jewish people at the start of their exile in Babylonia. They are in a state of despair, and Isaiah seeks to console them and to convince them that God maintains the covenant with them. At all of these times, people are likely to be resistant to hearing others.

When another person listens to them carefully and shows that they care about and understand their concerns and feelings, the possibility for communication opens up.

Listening to people also allows us to find out what words will be meaningful to them. Without listening, we can only recite a predetermined speech—we cannot talk with them, but only to them. In every situation, there are innumerable ideas and feelings we can choose to speak about. It is only by listening to someone that we can find out which ideas and feelings would be most useful to speak about.

Finally, this passage reminds us that the skill of listening is learned, and therefore needs to be taught. Isaiah's teacher is God; our teachers can be anyone from whom we are willing to learn. Like Isaiah, we need to learn how to listen again each day—we are never finished. Every person and every situation we encounter is different and presents us with new challenges. The key is that we need to be awake and to focus deliberately on the act of listening.

#### **4. All Real Living is Meeting**

Martin Buber, one of the most influential Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century, developed a full-fledged theory about the spiritual significance of dialogue based upon teachings about speech and listening that are found in Jewish and other traditions. He also wrote a great deal about the practical importance of dialogue.

In his classic work *I and Thou*, Buber posits that there are two different ways we can relate to the Other: as “It” or as “Thou.” In order to experience the sacred and to bring sacredness into the world, we should strive to treat other people, God, and the entire natural world as “Thou.”

It is easy to relate to people as “it”—as objects that are present only to fulfill a given purpose. We filter our perceptions of others through our desires, hopes, fears, and judgments, not seeing them as they truly are. This type of listening focuses on our own needs and wants rather than on truly understanding other human beings. In contrast, when we relate to the other as a “thou,” we establish a connection with the whole person. This brings about a change in ourselves, in the person with whom we relate, and in the entire world. In Buber's conception, the “I” that is part of an “I and Thou” relationship is different from the “I” that exists in an “I and It” relationship. Relating to other people as objects is isolating. We are stuck in ourselves. The sacred is shut out. Appreciating the intrinsic value of other human beings, on the other hand, brings us into relationship with all humanity.

Establishing an “I-Thou” relationship involves setting aside some of our hopes and fears about the other person, surrendering our personal will to change the other person, and allowing ourselves to be influenced by our conversation. We are required to make a conscious effort to learn about the other person as he or she wants to be known.

When two people treat each other as “Thou,” Buber says, they will experience the “indwelling of the Present Being,” the imminent manifestation of God in the world that the Jewish tradition calls the “*shekhinah*.” Dr. Arthur Green, Rector of the Rabbinical School at the Hebrew College in Boston, writes about the *shekhinah*:

*It is the divinity we may experience when enthralled by the beauties of nature, in deep encounter with another human being, or alone in moments of stillness, whenever the heart is open.*

*Judaism claims that this encounter may also take place in the context of sacred study (“Two who are together and study Torah, shekhinah abides in their midst” [Pirkei Avot 3:3]) and that it also has moral dimension: shekhinah is to be found in human acts of justice and compassion.*

(Excerpt from *These Are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life*, 2000 Arthur Green. Permission granted by Jewish Lights Publishing, P.O. Box 237, Woodstock, VT 05091 [www.jewishlights.com](http://www.jewishlights.com).3)

It may be helpful to remind dialogue participants that dialogue can be one path to encountering the sacred, and that it has much in common with the other more familiar paths that Green mentions: contemplating nature, quiet meditation, study, or good deeds, as well as prayer.

Buber also argues that dialogue is an essential practical tool for repairing the world:

*I believe, despite all, that the peoples in this hour can enter into dialogue, into a genuine dialogue, each of the partners. In a genuine dialogue each of the partners, even when he stands in opposition to the other, heeds, affirms, and confirms his opponent as an existing other. Only so can conflict certainly not be eliminated from the world, but be humanly arbitrated and led towards its overcoming. (from a speech: "Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace")*

## **D. Respect vs. Unwarranted Hatred**

For what was the First Temple destroyed? For [the] three [cardinal] sins that were rampant then: idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder... But in the time of the Second Temple [the Jews] kept busy studying Torah, and performing Jewish laws, and doing acts of kindness; for what then was it destroyed? Because of their unwarranted hatred of each other. From this one may learn that purposeless hatred is as great a sin as idolatry, immorality, and murder combined.

*Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 9b (7th Century CE)*

Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples...and all died in a single period, because they did not behave respectfully one to the other... All died between Passover and Shavuot. All died the same terrible death.

*Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 62b (7th Century CE)*

You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor but incur no guilt [because of him]. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself.

*Leviticus 19: 17-18*

When you see the donkey of your enemy buckling under his burden, and you feel like passing him by, you should help him lighten his load.

*Exodus 23: 5*

## Interpretation of the Texts

The Jewish tradition contains a number of strong warnings about what happens when people allow their differences to become destructive. It teaches that respecting one another and avoiding needless hatred are important for very practical reasons as well as for spiritual reasons. The Jewish tradition also includes a number of concrete directives and stories about how to respond to hatred in ourselves and in others. This section explores two key teachings about hatred and respect that are found in the Talmud as well as a commandment that is found in the Torah about transforming hatred through gestures of respect and dialogue.

Dialogue can give us a constructive way to deal with our differences and to avoid or alleviate hatred. By helping us to learn about other people and helping other people to learn about us, dialogue enables us to develop mutual respect. It allows us to show honor for other people and gives those other person an opportunity to honor us. Dialogue opens up channels for communication that we can use to resolve or manage our conflicts, preventing them from escalating in ways that produce hatred. It allows us to exchange ideas and to explore possibilities for cooperation even with people who differ from us in radical ways.

### 1. Unwarranted Hatred

In contrast to the concept of “controversy for the sake of heaven,” the Talmud presents us with the concept of “unwarranted hatred,” which it says is “a sin as great as idolatry, immorality, and murder combined.” The text states that the reason for the destruction of the Second Temple, commemorated each summer during the fast of Tisha b’Av, was unwarranted hatred, *sinat chinam*, between Jews. One of the saddest days in the calendar, Tisha b’Av begins a long season of introspection and repentance that culminates in Yom Kippur.

There are various historical accounts of the destruction of the Temple, but many historians argue that at the time of the Roman siege of Jerusalem, conflict between the various Jewish factions of the time had spiraled out of control and had become extremely violent. This conflict weakened the population of the city enormously, contributing to the victory of the Roman army. There is not agreement among scholars as to how much this internal Jewish conflict contributed to the Roman victory, but it is clear that in attributing the destruction of the Temple to *sinat chinam*, the Rabbis meant to teach about the incredible harm that can come as a result of unwarranted hatred.

We see many other examples of the kind of destructive hatred that the Rabbis warned about throughout Jewish history. Over the centuries, there has been enormous tension and conflict between religious and political groupings such as Hasidim and Mitnagidim, reformers and traditionalists, left and right. In many cases, these differences have led to extremely bitter, consuming fights and even to violence and murder. In other cases, these differences have harmed the community in less dramatic ways, preventing collaboration between groups, splitting families, or draining away energy.

The hatred that is described in the text seems to refer both to a feeling and to the actions that arise from it. Many commentators have explored what it means for hatred to be “unwarranted.” One interpretation is that hatred is unwarranted when it is unnecessary, when there are alternative ways of feeling and acting available to us. From this perspective, the text challenges us to examine our hearts and to question whether or not our feelings of hatred and the actions that come from them are really our only options.

Some commentators suggest that all hatred is unwarranted. Others argue that hatred may be justifiable at times, but that we should not assume in any particular case that it is. When we feel hatred, we should

pause to question this feeling and to seek alternatives. Even when we believe that the feeling is warranted, they say, we should be very careful about the way that we express it and respond to it.

We should be especially careful not to let ourselves be motivated by hatred when we criticize someone. The Jewish tradition calls on us to express our disagreements honestly and to criticize actions that we believe are immoral: “Love unaccompanied by criticism is not love... Peace unaccompanied by reproof is not peace.” (Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 54:3) As described in the section about “Guarding the Tongue,” however, Jewish tradition teaches that we should be careful when criticizing others to do so in a way that does not shame them or cause them unnecessary hurt. A set of commandments found in the book of Leviticus illustrates the connection between these teachings and the concept of unwarranted hatred:

*You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor but incur no guilt [because of him]. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19: 17-18)*

A key lesson that we can draw from these texts is that we always have decisions to make. We can choose to let negative feelings and assumptions grow into hatred and dominate our actions, or we can choose to act on more positive impulses. If we examine our relationship with the person whom we hate, we will often find that there are other ways to see that person and other ways to act. Dialogue can provide an opportunity for people to rework their relationships, to prevent hatred from developing or to transform it if it has already emerged.

## **2. Respect**

In another passage, we are told that twenty-four thousand disciples of Rabbi Akiva died one spring because they failed to treat each other with respect. Commentators describe this lack of respect in various ways: arrogance, egoism, and bitter disputes in which the students forgot that “these and these are both the word of the living God.” Some commentators believe that the students died of a plague, as punishment for their actions. Others say that they were killed in the course of the Bar Kochba uprising, perhaps because their disagreements made them disorganized and susceptible to attack.

To commemorate this tragedy, many traditional Jews observe a period of mourning for several weeks between Passover and Lag b’Omer. They do not conduct weddings, and it is forbidden to listen to instrumental music or even to shave or have one’s hair cut. The joyful spring holiday of Lag b’Omer marks the end of this period.

Jewish tradition teaches that treating people with respect, even through small gestures, can have enormous practical consequences. In a recent Lag b’Omer speech, Rabbi Yitzchok Breitowitz elaborates on the meaning of the word “respect” (*kavod* in Hebrew) and its implications:

*[K]avod is far more than mere civility, politeness, or the thin veneer of tolerance that may mask a barely-concealed disdain; rather, the word kavod is etymologically related to the word for “heaviness,” “weight,” “significance.”*

*Truly honoring a human being means you regard them as inherently significant, weighty, worthwhile, having something of value that they contribute to the world. Kavod means you see the other as a beloved child of G-d as indeed he or she is—to not necessarily agree with all they may have said or done but to recognize the essential goodness within their souls for that too is G-d’s will.*

*As parents and teachers recognize, when we strive to see the goodness in our fellow Jew—even if we have to strain our eyes a little bit—the perception becomes the reality and that goodness*

*becomes manifest and actualized. Conversely, when the message we communicate by word, gesture, or just neglect is “you don’t count,” “you don’t matter,” the recipient responds in kind. (www.wsat.org/drusha/two\_faces\_of\_sefirat\_ha.htm)*

Dialogue can give us a way to develop respect and show respect, even when it may seem very difficult.

### **3. Transforming Hatred through Respect and Dialogue**

The Midrash provides a brief story that illustrates how gestures of respect and dialogue can transform relationships and help people to overcome hatred. Commenting on the commandment, “When you see the donkey of your enemy buckling under his burden, and you feel like passing him by, you should help him lighten his load,” Rabbi Alexandri explains:

*Two donkey drivers who despised each other were traveling along the same path. One donkey started buckling under his burden and the other donkey driver passed him by. The driver [who was struggling with his donkey] said to the other driver, “It is written in the Torah, ‘When you see the donkey of your enemy buckling under his burden, and you feel like passing him by, you should help him lighten his load.’” [Exodus 23:5] Immediately the other driver went to help him. [While they were working together], they began to speak and the [driver who at first had refused to help] thought to himself, “This fellow really likes me and I had no idea!” Afterwards, they went to an inn together and they ate and drank. So, who caused them to make peace? It was because one of them recalled the Torah, for “...it was you who established equity.” [Psalms 99:4] (Midrash Tanchuma (Buber) Mishpatim, 9th Century CE)*

## **IV: Questions for Use in Study Sessions or Dialogue Sessions**

- a. What do you think this text is saying?
  
- b. What resonates for you in this text? What lessons or guidance does it suggest to you for this dialogue? What lessons can you draw from it for other parts of your life?
  
- c. What questions does this text raise for you?
  
- d. What challenges you about this text? Is there anything you disagree with or that disturbs you?

## V: Blessings and Songs

- Shehekianu

Baruch ata Adonai Elohenu Melekh ha'olam shehekianu v'kimanu v'higianu lazman hazeh.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
שֶׁהַחַיָּנוּ וְקִיְמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה.

*We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who gives us life, sustains us, and brings us to this sacred time.*

- Hineh Ma Tov (from Psalms 133:1)

Hineh ma tov uma na'im  
Shevet achim gam yachad.

Hineh ma tov uma na'im  
Shevet achot gam yachad.

הִנֵּה מַה טוֹב וַיְמַה נְעִים שְׁבֵת אַחִים גַּם יַחַד.  
הִנֵּה מַה טוֹב וַיְמַה נְעִים שְׁבֵת אַחֹת גַּם יַחַד.

*Behold how good and pleasant it is for  
brothers and sisters to live together in unity.*

• **Oseh Shalom (from Job 25:2 and the end of the Amidah prayer)**

Oseh shalom, shalom bimromav

Hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu

V'al kol yisra'el v'imru amen

Ya'aseh shalom, ya'aseh shalom

Shalom aleinu

V'al kol yisra'el (repeat)

עוֹשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמְרוֹמָיו  
הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ  
וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן

יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם, יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם,  
שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל . . .

*May the One who causes peace to reign in the highest heavens let peace descend upon us,  
upon all Israel, and let us say: Amen.*