

To Err Is Human; to Disagree, Jewish

The defects of the world, both material and the spiritual, all derive from the fact that every individual sees the aspect of existence that pleases him, and all other aspects that are baffling to him seem to deserve purging from the world. This thought leaves its imprint on individuals and groups, on generations and epochs—whatever is outside one's own is destructive and disturbing.

—Rav Kook, Orot HaKodesh 1:121



WHAT IS THE QUINTESSENTIAL Jewish attitude toward controversy? Rabbi Abraham Twerski relates that, growing up in the yeshiva, his teacher would say to him, in accented English: “You right! You 100 prozent right! Now I show you where you wrong.”

What kind of tradition insists both on the rightness and wrongness of the other? A tradition that, in the words of scholar Moshe Halbertal, “codifies controversy.” A student of Talmud is a student of argument. On almost every page of that massive series of tomes

is an argument. I remember one of my own teachers, Rabbi Ben Zion Bergman, telling us that when he grew up in the yeshiva, if you weren't paying attention and the teacher called on you, you always answered “there's a *machloket*”—a dispute—and you were always right. These were not empty or academic disagreements; alongside deeper questions, the rabbis wrestled with profound social dilemmas and urgent political issues.

We live in a time when words are called violence and differences of opinion are seen by one side as evidence of the moral degeneracy of the other. The wheel of inclusion has turned to exclusion, reminding us of the double meaning of “revolution.” The revolution of exclusion is here.

The Jewish tradition powerfully addresses this dynamic. It teaches us how we can grow past and heal the cleavages rending our culture.



A story from the Talmud (Berakhot 27b, 28a): Rabban Gamliel, the patriarch (the leader of the rabbinic community), has a disagreement with Rabbi Yehoshua about whether the evening prayer is mandatory or optional. Rabban Gamliel summons Rabbi Yehoshua and not only challenges him in public, but forces him to stand during Rabban Gamliel's entire lecture, embarrassing Rabbi Yehoshua and emphasizing Rabban Gamliel's powerful position.

Rabban Gamliel had abused his authority before, quelling dissent and forcing his own views. He had mistreated other rabbis and limited the number of students who could study in the Beit Midrash, the House of Study. But the shaming of Rabbi Yehoshua is the last straw: The sages depose Rabban Gamliel from his position, elevating Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in his place.

But the story does not end there. Rabban Gamliel apologizes to Rabbi Yehoshua—and one version says he apologizes to each of the sages—for his behavior. With a less exclusionary leader in place, the sages add benches to the study hall to accommodate the many

new students who want to join. With all of these fresh perspectives, the scholars are able to resolve all of the legal debates in front of them. And seeing how many students have joined the Beit Midrash and the impact of adding so many voices to the debate, Rabban Gamliel regrets his earlier decision. He realizes that by limiting diverse perspectives, he has limited the spread of Torah.

The original dispute about the evening prayer is adjudicated through argument, and a conclusion is reached. And because he realized the errors of his ways and authentically repented and changed, Rabban Gamliel is offered a path back to social esteem. He and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah rotate as head of the academy, thereby ensuring that no single view will dominate without challenge. Argument is vindicated as a way to achieve solutions, and a system of pluralistic leadership emerges.

What would become of Rabban Gamliel in our climate? There would be no road back. Cancellation in America is relentless. Your mistake or your crime or your sin defines you forever; it becomes the totality of who you are. We distrust regret or change. This is unfair and profoundly un-Jewish.

Another counter-narrative from the Talmud, this one even greater in its poignancy: When the great Rabbi Resh Lakish dies, his brother-in-law and intellectual sparring partner, Rabbi Yohanan, is inconsolable. The other rabbis seek to comfort Rabbi Yohanan by sending Rabbi Eliezer ben Pedat, a very fine legal mind, to engage and perhaps distract him. It does not go well.

Every time Rabbi Yohanan offers a teaching, the learned Rabbi Eliezer ben Pedat responds with “there is a *baraita* [rabbinic statement] that supports you.” Finally, Rabbi Yohanan bursts out:

“Are you comparable to the son of Lakish? ... [W]hen I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the halakha by itself would become broadened and clarified” (Bava Metziah 84a).

Rather than excluding opposing views, Rabbi Yohanan seeks

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them out, since they improve his own thinking. There are few parallels in our own world of warring camps. We all know what to read, listen to, and watch to reinforce our views, rather than upset or challenge them.

Methodological pluralism—the practice of encouraging many views in an attempt to arrive at a conclusion—is central to the Jewish ethos. One justification for this is that truth is sometimes plural: While some inarguable realities exist, there are also many questions of life that are not reducible to a single perspective. In our political life, liberals blame conservatives for all of the problems of the world, and vice versa. But the Talmud rejects that binary: Rather, we learn, “both these and those are the words of the living God” (Eruvin 13b).

One cannot really understand the truth if one does not understand the arguments and views that can be urged against it. Just as we appreciate our blessings when we feel the lack of them, we sharpen our perception of truth when we are confronted by arguments that appear to contradict it. As we can see from the example of Rabban Gamliel above, openness to others, including those with whom we might vehemently disagree, is also essential for creating a robust and living culture. Totalitarian regimes strangle dissent; they produce, in Nabokov’s memorable phrase about the Soviet Union, “poker-faced bullies and smiling slaves.” Thriving cultures cannot draw narrow bounds to speech.

Moreover, how many statements that began as outrageous or seemingly ridiculous over time have proved to be not only true but commonplace? The person in the ancient world who said “slavery

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is wrong” would be seen as an outcast and a fool. The person in modern times who says “slavery is right” would be seen the same way. Jewish texts preserve minority opinions out of a recognition that circumstances change, and that answers to complicated questions can evolve over time. It’s important to preserve elements of reasoning that might prove important in the future.

Even our most traditional ritual objects enshrine an understanding of the value of viewpoint diversity: The tefillin of the arm, we are told, has one compartment, since action must be unified to be successful, but the tefillin placed on the head has four compartments, because people’s ideas will always be varied.



Therefore it is improper on the grounds of love of inquiry and knowledge to dismiss anything that contradicts your view... even if the words run counter to your belief or religion. One should not say to him, “Do not speak! Shut your mouth!” For otherwise the true religion would not be clarified.

—Maharal of Prague (Be’er HaGolah, Well 1:7)

How should we respond when someone promulgates a view with which we disagree, or one that we find offensive, repugnant, even dangerous? What is our approach?

First, we need to separate the view from the individual who espouses it. We can argue without attacking. Once you assault an individual instead of his opinion, or conflate an individual with his opinion (“you are an anti-Zionist”), you make it much harder to change his mind—he is even more on the defensive, even more entrenched, and his view is now his identity, not simply his opinion.

Second, we must engage. Instead of walking away, shouting down, or deriding disagreeable opinions, we must take the more difficult but more responsible course of listening and marshaling opposing arguments. Even if you think your opinion is obviously correct, arguing for it is productive and important, both to clarify your reasoning to yourself, and to expose your views to the scrutiny of others. Immediate rejection is less helpful in the long run than serious engagement.

“I’m the boss” is also not an answer. Argument from authority, including “lived experience,” is never sufficient. Despite the reverence for teachers in the Jewish tradition, for example, there are limitations. The great Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin puts it this way: “A student must not accept his teacher’s words if he has an objection to them. Sometimes a student will be right, just as a small piece of wood can set a large one aflame.” Many teachers throughout history have refused to give their students the space to disagree, but Rabbi Hayyim realizes that to silence someone is not to answer him.

Third, we must take care to argue in the right way. How one argues is as important as the freedom to do so. The Talmud states: “Regarding two scholars who live in the same town and are not kind to one another, of them Scripture says, ‘I gave them laws that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live’ (Ezekiel 20:25)” (Megillah 32a). In other words, you can sour the very teaching itself if you do not present it in a way that can be heard. The rulings of the school of Hillel are preferred to those of Shammai not because they were more logical, but because Hillel and his students were “kindly and modest, studied both their own views and

those of the house of Shammai, and they quoted the words of the house of Shammai before their own” (Eruvin 13b).

Social media is the antithesis of such generosity. It might simply not be possible to use the medium for the messages we want to promote and for the arguments we want to have. People are regularly belittled, doxxed, called all sorts of names, and associated with views that are not their own, though their words can be twisted to accommodate them. We need to use such platforms as town squares, not firing ranges—more of a place where views can be civilly exchanged than a mechanism for target practice. This requires an elementary respect for the humanity of those who disagree, and the expectation that such respect will prove an ultimate good. As Talmud scholar Richard Hidary notes in *Dispute for the Sake of Heaven*, “the motivation directing attitudes of pluralism is peace, that is, communal unity through acceptance of diversity.”

Social media is too powerful and ubiquitous to simply renounce. Instead we should subject it to the same rules we apply to interaction in real life: Would I say this to a person’s face? Do I use the platform as a tool for connection or a channel for aggression? The medium is new and we need to learn, as a child learns socializing rules, what is permissible and what violates human decency. Attacks, snide mockery, and cruelty should be off the table.



Beyond that, a few simple rules to get us started:

- For anything controversial, argumentative, or angry, do not allow yourself to post until at least an hour has passed. “My moods don’t believe one another,” wrote Emerson. What seems justified in this moment can later be a cause of great regret.
- When someone is unkind or aggressive toward you, try to

reach out with a soft tone. Often you will discover that the recognition that there is a person on the other end of the interaction changes it entirely. I have had this experience many times, including eliciting public apologies once I did not react angrily. (I have sometimes reacted angrily and almost uniformly regret it.)

- It is not wrong, unethical, or unwise to block people. Indecency has a cost in availability.
- There is indeed *cherem*, excommunication, a practice much more common in ancient and medieval times than it is today. However big the playing field, there has to be a line that declares one out of bounds. Judaism, like any other nation, tradition, or religion, is not without limits, and there are Talmudic precedents for removing people from the study hall (although exile was not permanent).
- As the ’70s pop song put it, “I bruise you / You bruise me / We both bruise too easily.” Harmlessness is a prescription for the anodyne and the inessential. Giving “offense” cannot be a reason to exclude someone, since our capacity to be offended is virtually limitless. The overwhelming Jewish ethos is that of encouraging multiple perspectives. But controversy is not synonymous with savagery; we can encourage robust argument without sanctioning insult, mockery, or cruelty.

What then happens when there is a deviation that cannot be ignored or dismissed? There are a few cases, the most egregious, where there is no way back. In general, however, Judaism knows that people transgress and has a lot to say about what to do next. Specifically, it offers a central concept too often neglected in our retributive age: *teshuva*, repentance.

Some Jews are under the mistaken impression that Judaism asks people to confess to their misdeeds once a year, on Yom Kippur. In fact, there is a confessional in each morning service. The tradition's assumption is correct not only psychologically but logically: There are more ways to get an answer wrong than to get it right, more possibilities to mess up in this world than can be avoided day in and day out. Therefore we need a constant mechanism of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is required in Judaism not only from God but from one another. The medieval scholar Eleazar ben Judah wrote that "the most beautiful thing a man can do is to forgive." It can be difficult. If I forgive you, truly forgive you, then I must restore moral parity; I am no better than you. Accepting that steals the satisfactions of resentment, but it is essential. Jewish law insists that once someone has been forgiven, you must never remind the person of that fact. To do so is to reestablish a hierarchy that true forgiveness disavows.

To forgive is to forswear vengeance. It is to recognize that we too are in need of forgiveness, and our venom toward the other is often less about justice than about the satisfactions of vented anger. There are things of which one should be ashamed, of course, and public disapproval is a powerful and important tool of social cohesion. But all of us are imperfect and seek compassion. A society that casts others out because they did something wrong will soon find that it has swallowed poison assuming that the other will die from it.

The fundamental Jewish teaching is that every human being is in the image of God. We are all deserving of respect, a word that comes from the root meaning "to look again." We deserve a second look and a second chance. Wider boundaries of condemnation and more expansive embraces of forgiveness—this is the Jewish teaching needed for our time.



Let us close by returning to the words of Rav Kook cited at the opening of this piece. How accurately he described the dilemmas

of our age of cancellation: an inability to entertain one's own fallibility, a failure of humility, an excess of defensive self-justification. We throw others on the waste pile because *they* are flawed, but *we* are the avatars of what is right and true. We make no allowance for the changing of culture over time, or for the soul growth of human beings over their lives. We encase ourselves in a virtue that explains all and forgives nothing. We wield both the gavel and the axe, no matter how ugly, unproductive, and wrong.

We can and should do better. Jewish tradition, in its deep wisdom of both disagreement and forgiveness, can help. Both reason and faith should persuade us that listening and forgiving are more productive than disregarding and shaming. As the prophet says: "Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we break faith with one another?" (Malachi 2:10). *