

Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable: How far is too far?

Jewish texts give us guidance on how we should disagree, but how do we handle encounters with groups who challenge one of our fundamental values?



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6-7:30pm

Section 1: Disagreements

A machloket is a dispute between two different interpretations of Torah law. Although these disagreements can be incredibly destructive, disputes like those between Hillel and Shammai are considered constructive and known as “disagreements for the sake of heaven.”

Pirkei Avot 5:17

כָּל מַחְלֻקַּת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. אִיזוֹ הִיא מַחְלֻקַּת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זוֹ מַחְלֻקַּת הַלֵּל וְשֶׁמַּאי. וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זוֹ מַחְלֻקַּת קְרַח וְכָל עֲדָתוֹ:

Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure; But one that is not for the sake of Heaven, will not endure. Which is the controversy that is for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Hillel and Shammai. And which is the controversy that is not for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Korah and all his congregation.

Note: The story of Korah is found in Numbers. Korah led a revolt against Moses. He died, along with all his co-conspirators, when God caused "the earth to open her mouth and swallow him and all that pertained to him" (Numbers 16:31-33). However, "the children of Korah died not" (Numbers 26:11)

1. In Pirkei Avot, the defining criterion is described by the phrase "for the sake of heaven." What phrase would better distinguish the two kinds of arguments in your life? Why?

2. What would be an example of each kind of argument?

Rabbi Bartenura. Italy, 1445-1510. Commentary on the mishnah.

"והמחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים: התכלית והסוף המבוקש מאותה מחלוקת להסיג האמת. וזה מתקיים כמו שאומרים) 1 "מתוך הוויכוח יתברר האמת, " כמו שנתבאר במחלוקת הלל ושמאי שהלכה כבית הלל. 2 (והמחלוקת שאינה לשם שמים: תכלית הנרצה בה בקשת השררה ואהבת הניצוח. וזה הסוף אינו מתקיים כמו שמצינו במחלוקת קרח ועדתו. שהתכלית וסוף כוונתם הייתה בקשת הכבוד והשררה והיו להיפך .

1) An argument that is for the sake of Heaven: [This means] that the purpose (the “end”) of such an argument is only to reach the truth. And this [truth] will endure, as the saying goes, “From argument will emerge truth”. This is just like how the truth emerged in the arguments between Hillel and Shammai that the law is according to Beit Hillel.

2) An argument that is not for the sake of Heaven: [This means] that the purpose of such an argument is only the desire of power and the love of victory. And this type of argument will not endure, as we found in the arguments of Korach and his company. Their purpose (their “end”)

was the [selfish] desire for honor and power, but which actually led to the exact opposite outcome.

1. According to Rabbi Bartenura (15th c. Italy), what are the necessary conditions for the kinds of debates that we should enter into?

2. Do you agree? What values do you think need to be present in order to respond to opposing ideas with debate?

3. What are some examples of your life on campus or off campus where you encounter opposing worldviews? How might Source 1 or 2 help you navigate your response?

Talmud Bavli, Masechet Eiruvim 13b

אמר רבי אבא אמר שמואל: שלש שנים נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל, הללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו והללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו. יצאה בת קול ואמרה: אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים הן, והלכה כבית הלל. וכי מאחר שאלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים מפני מה זכו בית הלל לקבוע הלכה כמותן - מפני שנוחין ועלובין היו, ושונין דבריהן ודברי בית שמאי. ולא עוד אלא שמקדימין דברי בית שמאי לדבריהן .

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Shmuel: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued. One asserted, “The law agrees with our views”, and the other asserted, “The law agrees with our views”. The voice of God came down and announced, “They are both the words of the living God, but the law agrees with Beit Hillel.” Since both were the words of the living God, what entitled Beit Hillel to have the law agree with them? Because they were kind and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and not only that, but they mentioned the rulings of Beit Shammai before their own.

1. How can two contradictory opinions both be right? Is it possible?

2. Why is it important to understand the opinions of people you disagree with?

Section 2: Progressive Zionism

1. Los Angeles Review of Books:

“Zionism” has become a dirty word — synonymous with racism, apartheid, and oppression; the white Europeans who established an outpost of Western colonialism in a land belonging exclusively to dark-skinned Arabs. Jewish settlers in Palestine have been cast as imperialists in a land to which they have no moral claim.

Hence, an important question for leftists. In the context of Israeli military domination and West Bank expansionism, can a legitimate case be made for a progressive Zionism?

For anyone who believes that Jewish nationalism is as defensible as any other nationalism, the answer is yes, but a complicated yes. Defending Zionism without condemning the occupation and supporting a Palestinian state is untenable. But so too is supporting the Palestinian struggle for statehood without condemning the antisemitic elements of Nazi-influenced Arab nationalism and its existential threat to Israel.

Jewish nationalism or Palestinian nationalism — which do you legitimize and which do you invalidate? Decades of vitriolic verbal war between partisans on both sides indicate that the answer often hinges on the unstated passions, prejudices, and fears that dictate a compulsive, non-empathic emotional attachment to “our side.” The more important question, not asked by extremists on either side, is: Why must this be an either/or choice?

Jewish nationalism is as legitimate as Palestinian or any other nationalism — no more and no less. When all countries founded on the displacement of ethnic, religious, tribal, or native groups renounce their right to exist, Israel should be among them. Until then, the struggle for human rights must include the support for Jewish national survival alongside a Palestinian state — not a binational state that would nullify Israel and invite a war of ethnic cleansing on both sides. Progressives should be able to call themselves Zionist without being shamed, shunned, attacked, and vilified, as they are on American campuses and in progressive circles here and abroad.

While there may be disagreements over strategy, progressive Zionism is a “both/and” perspective that calls for an end to West Bank expansionism and Palestinian terrorism. To be a progressive Zionist is to have the courage to challenge Israel to clean its house of racist policies toward Palestinians while also calling on anti-Zionists to clean up their antisemitism. It condemns both the racist leadership of Netanyahu as well as the incitements to anti-Israel violence from Hamas. It envisions Jerusalem as a shared capital of two nations.

This opens the door to coalitions of progressive Palestinians and Israelis as well as black, Muslim, and Jewish social activists that conjointly resist prejudice in all forms — a badly needed antidote to the identity wars dividing the left and the nation. Progressive Zionists know that

antisemitism and racism together are the core of white supremacist ideology. These connected bigotries split progressive forces, thereby feeding the rise of fascism here and abroad.

A hopeful recent development began with the 2017 launch of Zioness, a group of feminist activists that spoke out against antisemitism in the Women's March leadership and other left demonstrations. Its mission is to empower Jews to be activists in the struggle to advance social, racial, economic, and gender justice in the United States without trying to hide their Jewishness or their Zionism. Its slogan sums it all up: *Unabashedly Progressive. Unapologetically Zionist.* You can indeed be both.

1. Often when we talk about Israel people are trying to win an argument rather than understand a more complicated truth. How could you apply the lessons from the texts above in your conversations with others about Israel?

2. Do you think that the Progressive Zionist movement discusses Israel in keeping with the values of the texts of we read earlier?

Section 3: Role conflict in other movements

Movement for Black Lives:

1. Following the Republican and Democratic national conventions, groups associated with the Black Lives Matter movement released a platform Monday that labels Israel an “apartheid state” and excoriates the United States for its alliance with a country it alleges systemically perpetrates a “genocide” against the Palestinians.

The Movement for Black Lives’ platform, which demands “an end to the war against Black people,” marks the campaign’s first official entry into America’s debate over specific federal policies.

Highly critical of the Jewish state — which it said “practices systematic discrimination and has maintained a military occupation of Palestine for decades” — the platform devoted a section to the US-Israel relationship. “The US justifies and advances the global war on terror via its alliance with Israel and is complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people,” the text said.

The platform goes on to suggest America’s close relationship with Israel and commitment to its security makes “US citizens complicit in the abuses committed by the Israeli government.”

“Israel is an apartheid state with over 50 laws on the books that sanction discrimination against the Palestinian people,” it continued. “Palestinian homes and land are routinely bulldozed to make way for illegal Israeli settlements. Israeli soldiers also regularly arrest and detain Palestinians as young as 4 years old without due process. Every day, Palestinians are forced to walk through military checkpoints along the US-funded apartheid wall.”

At the end of this section, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel is advertised as a resource, along with a website for Black-Palestinian solidarity.

The platform was released by The Movement for Black Lives, an umbrella group of more than 50 organizations, including the Black Lives Matter Network, the Black Liberation Collective, and the Center for Constitutional Rights, which often promotes the Palestinian cause.

2. Amanda Berman, founder and executive director of the pro-Israel advocacy group Zioness, said she worries that Movement for Black Lives will insert language into the 2020 agenda that, she argued, could leave some Jewish Americans feeling unwelcome. Zioness describes itself as a coalition of progressive, pro-Israel, social justice activists.

“This is a moment when we can’t stay home, we can’t miss this opportunity to show up and be allies, but there is this fear that the only Jewish state in the world is going to be targeted and singled out,” Berman told The Times of Israel.

“That’s a real distraction from the work that we all have to be doing as Americans,” Berman added. “If we are talking about Israel and Palestine, we are not talking about the issues that are within our control and the things that we can do for racial equality in this country.”

1. The Movement for Black Lives is only one organization that Jewish people might want to support but holds positions on Israel they may disagree with. How would you reconcile two conflicting opinions in your support for other movements?

2. If we agree with most of what a group stands for, but disagree with something specific, does that mean we shouldn't work with them at all? Are there stances an organization could take that would be irreconcilable for you?