1. WELCOME

Before we begin, let’s review the *brit*—the covenant—that animates our time together:

- **Accountability:** I’ll show up for eight meetings over the next eight months. Or I’ll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone’s time. Which means that meetings will start and end on time, no matter how good the schmoozing.
- **Presence:** When we’re together, I’ll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
- **Double Confidentiality:** I’ll maintain complete confidentiality. What I hear and say stays here. That means that even when I see group member in another context, like at Central or in the neighborhood, I won’t bring up what has been shared in our group unless you open the conversation.
- **Vulnerability:** I’ll stretch myself to be as open and honest as I can with my perspectives and experiences to create a safe environment that might encourage others to takes risks, too.
- **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
- **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight:** I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to “solve their problem.” No advice unless it’s asked.
- **Listening:** I understand that some of us are talkers and some of us are quieter, so I’ll be aware to not dominate discussions or always leave the weight of it to others.
2. ASK AND SHARE

Welcome to our conversation. Please think of one person in your life with whom you currently, or in the past, have seriously disagreed. Take a moment, and then we will all share who we thought of, and maybe say a word or two about why we thought of that person.

You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

3. LEARN

There are a lot of hot-button issues in our world today, a lot of things about which people disagree vociferously, and sometimes viciously. Rhetoric in the media, online, and in person around topics like abortion, immigration, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and gun control can devolve quickly into inflammatory statements and personal attacks that leave all parties feeling angry and frustrated.

But, of course, it doesn’t have to be that way. Voltaire famously said, “I do not agree with what you have to say, but I’ll defend to the death your right to say it.” And even more than the right to speak, perhaps there’s something even to be gleaned through disagreements; as 19th century British women’s rights activist Annie Bessant put it, “Quick condemnation of views with which we disagree... is the sign of a narrow mind...The wise boy, who will become the wise man, tries to understand and to see truth in ideas with which he does not agree.”

In real life, of course, this can be tricky. In conflict, issues of truth and justice may feel as though they are—or may really be—on the line, and we often feel not only intellectually, but also emotionally invested in the outcome of a debate. But if we can
find a way to disagree well, it might just open up new possibilities and clear the way for unexpected outcomes.

Below are two texts from different parts of the Talmud, the major corpus of Rabbinic law and culture in the Jewish tradition, edited around 500 C.E. (the first text) and 200 C.E. (the second text), respectively. They tell the story of the academies of Hillel and Shammai, two different schools and ideological camps that thrived in the first century of the Common Era. Though they disagreed, at times profoundly, about how Jewish law should be decided, they managed those disagreements in fruitful ways, as we’ll see below. Please read the texts aloud together.

For three years the academy of Shammai and the academy of Hillel argued. One group asserted, “The law follows our views,” and the other asserted, “The law follows our views.” A Heavenly voice came down and announced, “They are both the words of the living God, but the law follows the academy of Hillel.” Since both were the words of the living God, what entitled the academy of Hillel to have the law agree with them? Because they were kind and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of the academy of Shammai, and not only that, they mentioned the rulings of the academy of Shammai before their own. [Babylonian Talmud, Eiruvin 13b]

Even though the academy of Shammai declares one thing kosher while the academy of Hillel declares the same thing not kosher, even though one forbids while the other permits, the academy of Shammai did not refrain from marrying the women of the academy of Hillel, nor did the academy of Hillel refrain from marrying the women of the academy of Shammai. Even though one side declares things to be pure while the other side declares the same thing to be impure, nonetheless they did not refrain from preparing things requiring a state of purity by using things from the other side. [Mishnah Yevamot 1:4]
As we reflect on these texts, here are a few questions to consider:

**Interpretive Questions**

- Why does the Heavenly voice declare that the academy of Hillel’s rulings were more in line with Jewish law?
- How do the disagreements between the academies impact their relationships?
- What’s the significance of their “not refraining from preparing things requiring a state of purity by using things from the other side?”

**Reflective Questions**

- When was a time when you acted like the academy of Hillel in a disagreement?
- When was a time that you didn’t? Why didn’t you?
- Are there times when the “academy of Hillel” model isn’t appropriate in a disagreement? What are different tactics that people use to disagree, and when should they be used?
- How do you hope to disagree with others? How do you hope that they will disagree with you?
4. MORE PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Let’s go deeper into the Jewish take on disagreements. Here are several texts—from the Mishnah, the Talmud, a 18th-19th c. Lithuanian rabbi and two contemporary thinkers—to consider. You need not discuss all of the texts; feel free to choose those that speak to you. These texts are merely tools for reflecting on your own stories and experiences. Please use them in a way that organically continues or deepens the conversation you have been having so far.

Hillel said: Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving humanity and bringing people closer to Torah.

--Mishnah Pirke Avot 1:12

- What does it mean to “love peace and pursue peace”? How does one do that?
- What does it mean to love and pursue peace when you hold a disagreement with someone?
- In what situations in your life does pursuing peace seem easy (or at least doable)? In what situations does it seem especially challenging?

You should want there to be peace between you [and another], even if in your opinion he sinned against you; nevertheless you should be the pursuer of peace, and not to wait until your fellow reconciles with you (first)

--Rav Chaim of Volozhin, Sefer Ruach Chaim

- How does Rav Chaim suggest a person should behave in order to be a “pursuer of peace”?
- In what kinds of situations does his advice seem wise to you?
- Are there situations in which his advice would be unwise or inadvisable? What are they?
It was taught: On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument [in his debate with the other Sages about the purity of a specialized oven] but [the other rabbis] did not accept them. Said he to them: “If the halakhah [the law] agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it!” The carob-tree was uprooted a hundred cubits from its place. [Others say, four hundred cubits.] “No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,” they retorted. Again he said to them: “If the halakhah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!” The stream of water then flowed backwards. “No proof can be brought from a stream of water,” they rejoined. Again, he urged: “If the halakhah agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it!” Suddenly, the walls of the room began to cave in. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked [the walls], saying: “When scholars are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what right have you to interfere?” So [the walls] did not fall, in honor of Rabbi Joshua, nor did they return to upright, in honor of Rabbi Eliezer; and they are still standing at angles to this day. Again, he said to them: “If the halakhah agrees with me, let heaven prove it!” Suddenly, a heavenly voice cried out: “Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, given that the halakhah agrees with him in all matters!” But Rabbi Joshua rose up and exclaimed: “It [the Torah] is not in heaven” [Deuteronomy 30:12]. What did he mean by this? Said Rabbi Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a heavenly voice, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, “After the majority must one incline.” [Exodus 23:2].

Rabbi Nathan met Elijah the prophet and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be God, do at that moment [when Rabbi Joshua rebuked the Heavenly Voice]? God laughed [with joy], Elijah replied, saying, “My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me.”

-- Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59a-b

• How does Rabbi Eliezer try to persuade the other rabbis that his position is correct?
• Are the other rabbis persuaded? Why or why not?
• Why doesn’t Rabbi Eliezer accept even the heavenly voice’s input in this debate?
• What’s God’s response to Rabbi Joshua?
• What do you think this story is trying to say?
• Have there been times in your own life when you’ve experienced a tension between process and outcome in navigating disagreements? What happened?
In a disagreement, how much does “who’s right” matter, and how much does “following correct procedure” matter?

Rabbi Melissa Weintraub and Dr. Eyal Rabinovitch are Co-Directors of JCPA’s Resetting the Table: Building Dialogue, Civility and Deliberation on Israel.

In a context as polarized as Israel, we open the space to meaningful communication across disagreement when we show others we “get” them or at least are sincerely trying to. When we focus instead on making our case – no matter how compelling and substantiated – if we haven’t demonstrated to our interlocuters that we “get” them, it simply won’t land. Rather than listening to find flaws, we [seek to] listen to help others articulate what matters most to them. We listen to identify the concerns, values, emotions, and stories that drive them. More generally, we alter our intention from winning an argument to seeking out comprehensive understanding. When I demonstrate that I have both the desire and willingness to understand you as you wish to be understood, when I prove to you that I see you as you wish to be seen, I maximize the likelihood that you will listen to me in return.

--Rabbi Melissa Weintraub and Dr. Eyal Rabinovitch, “Slowing Down the Conversation.”

How do Weintraub and Rabinovitch suggest a disagreement should proceed?
How is this different from, or similar to, the ways in which you’ve seen people discuss charged topics, like Israel politics?
In what ways does this ethos reflect that of Hillel and Shammai’s, or Aaron’s?
Do the authors suggest that this sort of deep, empathetic listening will end disagreements? Why or why not?
What kind of impact do you think this approach has?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.
5. DO

Navigating our conflicts with one another in a way that is constructive and respectful can be difficult, especially given how much is often at stake. But, on the other hand, there’s too much at stake for us not to do so. As Marian Wright Edelman, president and founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, once said, “We are not going to deal with the violence in our communities, our homes, and our nation until we learn to deal with the basic ethic of how we resolve our disputes and to place an emphasis on peace in the way we relate to one another.”

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What’s one insight that you’ve gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life based on this conversation?
- What’s one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions.

Thank you for being part of this conversation. Please share this conversation guide with others in your community. And join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.