BIG QUESTION: HOW DO WE LISTEN TO THOSE WITH WHOM WE DISAGREE?

This discussion will focus on the importance of opening our hearts and minds to the views of those with whom we disagree. Participants will reflect on their experience of exploring alternative viewpoints, and consider the Jewish value of holding multiple truths.

NAME TAGS:

Please ask everyone in the group to wear a name tag (or, if seated around a table, to place a name card in front of them). Even if most people know one another, it is important that no one feel uncomfortable for not remembering everyone else’s name.

CHOOSING YOUR TEXTS:

The text study contains a number of different texts. It is unlikely you will get to all of them. That is perfectly fine! Before you meet, you will want to read through the texts, to get a sense of which ones you would like to prioritize. Then see where the discussion leads you!

DIRECTING MEMBERS TO THE ONLINE CONTENT:

At least a few days before you meet, please direct your group members to the Viewpoint Diversity Experience website section entitled “Venture Beyond Your Moral Matrix” (A link to this page is on the CORE Groups page of the Central Synagogue website). Once there, they should choose a video or article from a perspective other than their own (i.e. liberals should choose something from the conservative list, and vice versa). As them to make a note of their reaction to this piece, so that you can discuss it when you come together.

INTRODUCTION AND ICE-BREAKER:

Ask each person to introduce themselves, and to share with the group:

(a) their name; AND
(b) a recent time when you heard something unexpected.
OPENING ACTIVITY

*Materials: Copies of the attached images (in color, if possible).*

Pass out copies of the attached pages, which contain a number of different images. Ask participants to first take a few minutes to look at the pictures and reflect on the following questions:

1. Which of these pictures most evokes the idea of something “right”? Why?
2. Which of these pictures evokes the idea of something “wrong”? Why?

Then ask participants to break into pairs. Ask the members of each pair to take turns talking for two minutes, in response to the questions above. Their partner should not interrupt or offer his or her own views. The only job of the listener is to listen.

When you bring the group back together, you might want to ask: What was it like speaking when you knew there would be no response? What was it like listening without responding? What similarities or differences did you notice in your answers. To what do you attribute the difference, if any?

TEXT STUDY

Attached is a text-study sheet that you may use to facilitate a conversation about the Jewish ideal of honoring competing viewpoints. Please make sure to either make a copy for each member or ask everyone to bring it themselves, in paper or electronic form. If you choose the latter course, you may still wish to print a few extra copies for those who may forget to bring theirs.

Here are some things to consider:

(a) It is customary to recite a blessing before studying Torah.

(b) Our tradition teaches us that Torah study can be a source of healing and blessing. You may want to ask members of the group if they would like to
dedicate their study to anyone in particular. This is a nice way to help the group get to know one another, and to learn about significant events in each other’s lives.

(c) Depending on the preferences of your group, you may choose to distribute this sheet the week before the meeting, so that participants will be familiar with the texts, and can begin to think about their own responses.

(d) You can choose to either work through the texts as one group, or to break up into pairs (“hevruta”) for an initial period of discussion, and then allow the pairs to share something they learned with the group.

(e) The ultimate goal of these groups is not for participants to master a particular number of Jewish texts, but to connect with one another. If group members are sharing their own stories and experiences in a way that seems fruitful, there is no need to cut off that conversation in order to make sure you “finish” the text sheet. If you are unsure, you can always poll the group to decide whether it is time to move on.

MORAL FIELDWORK

Time to put your listening skills into practice! Between now and your final discussion, each participant is invited to do some “moral fieldwork.” If possible, they should: (a) attend an event, group, or program that is at odds with their general political beliefs; or (b) invite someone whose views differ substantially from theirs to have a conversation in which they focus on listening. They will have a chance to “report back” at your next session.

CONCLUSION

We recommend that you wind down the text study about 15 minutes before the end of the session, to allow for a meaningful conclusion. This conclusion may take any shape you wish. Some possibilities are:

(a) Ask each person to name one insight they have gained, or one question that they are taking with them.
(b) Ask each person to say one word to represent how they are feeling after your discussion.
(c) Ask each person to name one practice they would like to try between now and the next meeting.