

Having Difficult Conversations

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Purim is just around the corner. And then Pesach is coming. In about six weeks we will gather with family and friends around our Seder tables. We will read from the Haggadah, ask and answer questions, and enjoy the familiar food after we retell the ancient story.

Sometimes, though, that same Seder table can be the arena for some pretty sharp arguments. I remember one Pesach when this happened. We had just finished the gefilte fish. It was time for the next course. We had hired a teenager, who was not Jewish to help us. Alice had asked her to start clearing the dishes in order to bring in the soup.

Before that could happen, however, two of our guests, young women in their 20's, got into an argument about Israel. Their voices rose higher and higher as they became more and more heated. They moved from talking about their different perspectives to attacking each other's ignorance and evil motives.

They saw Israel in completely different ways. One was passionate that Israel had no business in the occupied territories and was guilty of genocide there. The other was equally passionate that Israel wanted peace but could achieve peace only with genuine partners for peace, and there are none.

As the argument went on, the meal had come to a standstill. There was no movement from the kitchen. No plates being cleared. No soup.

Finally, Alice went in the kitchen to investigate. She asked our helper, "Are you OK? This was when I had asked you to help clear and bring in the next course, remember?"

The helper replied, "I was afraid to come in. I was waiting until the fight ended."

Alice told her, "If you wait for the fight to be over, you'll have to wait until the Fourth of July. Please – just come on in so we can get on with our meal."

That was many years ago, long before I had begun rabbinical school. I had no training yet in how to help people have difficult conversations in a constructive way.

Since then, and particularly while I was in rabbinical school, I have learned some techniques to make conversations less contentious and more constructive. One source of that wisdom is a firm called the Public Conversations Project. The firm helps communities both in America and abroad speak about sensitive issues in ways that help them remain strong as communities and continue to respect each other.

Another resource I found very helpful is this book. You are welcome to take a look at during Kiddush today. It's called Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. Its authors are all members of the Harvard Negotiation Project.

I decided last week to speak on this topic today. Early this week I got a notice from the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis. We will have our regular meeting this month on March 24. The only topic on the agenda is a presentation called "Difficult Conversations." So rabbis are continuing to educate themselves about this.

I will suggest today some approaches that may make difficult conversations a little more productive. I don't expect anyone to remember or apply everything I say, but I hope some of this will come to mind when a difficult conversation arises.

I focus particularly on Israel because that is the topic I care most about and because that is the topic that so often divides communities and turns friends into enemies.

People who support Israel with passion regularly clash with those who doubt Israel's motives or wisdom. The doubters focus on the situation in Gaza and the West Bank. The supporters want to talk instead about lives that have been lost in Israel, and the absence of any true partner for peace. And all of this is made even more urgent today in this time of unprecedented upheaval throughout the Arab nations in the region.

Let's consider an example I am making up. Barbara and Carol are both Jewish. They have been friends for many years. Here is their imagined conversation about Israel.

Carol begins. "I'm so upset about what's happening in Gaza. Those poor people. They can't get food and medicine. Israel is killing them with its embargo. As if it wasn't enough that Israel killed so many civilians in its illegal invasion."

Barbara responds angrily. "Gaza? How can you have any sympathy for Gaza? Didn't you see all those rockets they fired into children's playgrounds in Israel? Gaza brought it on themselves. "

Carol is stung and hurt by Barbara's angry response. Carol answers with equal anger, "You talk as if Israel weren't killing civilians. Let me tell you, the Israelis have killed far more civilians than anyone else. Israel attacked Gaza with a disproportionate war. We need to show Israel it can't get away with that. I'm all in favor of these boycotts of Israel I've been reading about. I say hurt them in business and they'll stop soon enough."

Barbara's answer ends the conversation. She says, "That kind of leftist and anti-Semitic talk doesn't really surprise me, coming from you, Carol. You've

always been a little uneasy about being Jewish. But you couldn't be more wrong about this situation. We don't have anything more to talk about."

Each party is completely convinced of her own viewpoint. Nobody learns anything. They raise their voices. Their tempers flare. They hurt each other's feelings. They damage a longstanding relationship.

How might they do that conversation better? That's the question I am addressing today.

First of all, at least one of them needs to want to have a productive conversation. If all they both want to do is convince the other how wrong she is, they are going to fail. And they are sure to hurt each other also.

Second, for Barbara or Carol or any one of us, the most helpful advice comes from the basic prayer of Judaism, the *Sh'ma*.

Two words in Hebrew say it all. "*Sh'ma Yisroel.*" "Hear O Israel."

The *Sh'ma* emphasizes the importance of listening. It does that with its very first word. "*Sh'ma.*" "Hear."

We must listen to each other, and we must listen carefully. Merely being physically present when someone is talking to us is not enough. If our minds are elsewhere, we are not listening carefully. If we use the time while the other is speaking just to plan our rebuttal, we are not listening carefully.

Let me tell you a memory from my childhood. I remember sitting at dinner with my parents and sisters. My mother would be speaking. Then my father would introduce what he wanted to say by beginning with, "While you were talking, I was thinking." It happened more than once. It always made my mother mad.

Why is it so important to listen carefully? Because that is really the essential skill for turning difficult conversations into productive conversations.

When we try to listen in a conversation, and not just wait for the other person to stop talking, we need to listen carefully for three different elements of any conversation. Those elements are, first of all feelings. What are you feeling? What is the other person feeling?

Second, listen to what you both are revealing about your differences over what you think is important.

Finally, listen for the differences between facts and conclusions.

Feelings.

Differences about what's important.

And facts versus conclusions.

Let's begin with feelings. Difficult conversations always involve feelings. The participants may not acknowledge their own strong feelings. They might not speak about them directly. But those feelings will always play the central role in difficult conversations. Difficult conversations do not just *involve* feelings; they are at their very core *about* feelings.

It's no good saying to ourselves that we won't let our feelings show. That will not work. We show our feelings whether we want to or not. We can't help it.

Maybe we won't directly say "I'm angry" or "I'm frightened." But if we don't say it directly, we're going to say it indirectly, and a lot less clearly. It's far better to acknowledge and express our feelings than to pretend that they don't exist.

To turn a difficult conversation into a productive conversation, we need to stop trying to persuade and start trying to listen and learn. And first and foremost, we need to hear the indications of the other person's feelings. And we need to hear what we ourselves are saying that reveals what we ourselves our feeling.

Sh'ma Yisroel. Hear our feelings and the feelings of the other.

Second, what is important to each person?

Most difficult conversations are disagreements about what is important. Carol knows that Hamas was sending rockets into Israel. But she feels that's not as important as the deprivations that she believes the people of Gaza are suffering. Barbara knows that people in Gaza are suffering. But protecting Israel is much more important to her. She is also sure that Israel is doing all it can to avoid civilian deaths. Moreover, she's angry about media distortions that criticize Israel strongly while letting its enemies off with much slighter criticism, if any.

Listen so you can hear what's important to you and important to the other person.

Sh'ma, Yisroel. Hear the differences about what's important.

And finally, facts versus conclusions.

On the most basic level, when we discuss a difficult topic we generally want to persuade someone about what happened. Carol wants Barbara to understand that Israel targets civilians. Barbara vigorously denies that this is true. She also wants Carol to appreciate the threats to Israel's very existence.

But the idea of "what happened" is itself complex. We each draw upon a huge volume of data to try to understand the world. We filter that data through our own perceptions. We distinguish in our own ways what is important and unimportant. We rely upon our own perceptions of what sources are reliable or unreliable. We then derive our individual interpretations from what we have

perceived to be the facts. Finally, we draw conclusions from those interpretations.

Statements like “Israel targets civilians” or “ Hamas threatens Israel’s existence” are not statements of fact. They are conclusions. They are the end points, not the starting points, of our mental process. To get anywhere in discussing this or any difficult topic, we need to uncover the steps that led each of us to these conclusions. We do this by listening.

Sh’ma Yisroel. Listen so you will hear the difference between facts and conclusions.

Let’s revisit the conversation between Barbara and Carol and apply these insights.

Now, of course, Carol hasn’t heard this sermon, since I made up both Barbara and Carol. So Carol starts our imaginary conversation the same way. Carol begins. “I’m so upset about what’s happening in Gaza. Those poor people. They can’t get food and medicine. Israel is killing them with its embargo. As if it wasn’t enough that Israel killed so many civilians in its illegal invasion.”

But Barbara did hear my sermon, or read this book. So Barbara might respond, “I can hear how upset you are over this situation.”

That’s a good start. It acknowledges that Carol has strong feelings and that Barbara recognizes them. Barbara has heard how Carol feels. Sh’ma Yisroel. Hear the feelings.

Barbara might then say, “I’m also really upset, not only about the fate of the people in Gaza but also the people in Israel. I also worry a lot about Israel’s security now and her long-term future in light of constant threats to eliminate the State of Israel.”

That’s good, too. Barbara has heard her own feelings and now expresses them directly. She signals to Carol that she is ready to hear about Carol’s feelings but lets Carol know that Barbara also feels strongly and has concerns beyond those that Carol mentioned.

Sh’ma Yisroel. Hear what’s important to each person.

Barbara might go on, “I’d like to know more, though, Carol, about some of the terms I think you used. If I heard you right, you said that Israel’s embargo is killing the people of Gaza and that it killed “so many civilians” in an illegal invasion.” When I hear those terms, I feel angry. I see the situation very differently. Later as we talk I want to tell you why, but first I’d really like to know what you mean by those words and how you see the situation.”

Barbara shifted the conversation away from a confrontational mode to a learning mode. She expressed her genuine curiosity, as well as her own feelings of anger on hearing terms she finds offensive. She wants to be sure she has heard

Carol correctly. She wants to clarify what Carol means. She is really curious, and not just as a conversational ploy, to learn how Carol reached her conclusions. After that Barbara can explain how she reached her conclusions. She couldn't do that when she and Carol were fighting rather than discussing.

Barbara is trying to hear how Carol arrives at her conclusions. *Sh'ma Yisroel*. Facts versus conclusions.

It's true that Carol might respond, "Barbara, you don't sound like the Barbara I know. I feel like maybe you're handling me. Is this one of those 'active listening' fads or something?"

Barbara could answer, "Yes, Carol, I am trying to be kind of deliberate. The last time we talked about Israel I felt that all we did was get mad at each other. Since then I've learned some ways to have difficult conversations, mainly by really listening very carefully to each other. I hope you will agree this is a better way to talk about this."

I can't map out entirely what might happen from there. But both Barbara and Carol will probably speak more constructively and with less anger. Barbara wants to defend Israel. Carol wants to help Barbara understand why some people disagree about Israel's policies. This is the best approach for them both to succeed.

In the end, it comes back to the words with which we started. *Sh'ma Yisroel*. Hear, O Israel. Listen carefully, then it will go well with you.

May we learn to become better listeners in order to turn difficult conversations into productive conversations.

Let us say, "Amen."