

LOVE IN A TIME OF POLARIZATION

PREP FOR THE SESSION

Session Objective:

Through exploring the value of loving-kindness, particularly focusing on seeing the human behind the opinion, learners will develop new insights that support their ability to stay in relationship with the person they disagree with and take small steps toward healing our fractured, us-vs-them world.

At-a-Glance:

In today's polarized world, our instinct when we disagree about something personal and high stakes might be to make assumptions about the other person, attack their character, or even dehumanize them - to make the conversation "us versus them." But when we strive to empathize with the other person's story, we stand a chance to stay in relationship with them. Learners will explore, how can we practice loving-kindness with those we disagree with? What can two rabbis, who accidentally ripped a Torah scroll, teach us about kind disagreement? And how might storytelling be a powerful way of practicing loving-kindness in even the most heated arguments?



Time Estimate:

45 mins



Best Uses:

- Best for 17+ year olds, Preferably in person but can be adapted to virtual.



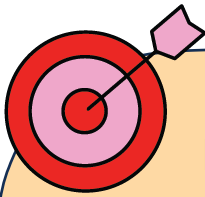
Materials Needed:

- paper and pens
- flipchart paper or whiteboard

Recommended setting: in a quiet, private space where learners can spread out and have one-on-one conversations without being interrupted.

LET'S GET STARTED

5-10
min



FRAME THE ISSUE

Think about an issue that you feel really passionately about - something that gets you fired up, that makes you angry, that you cannot understand how anyone could have any other perspective on. What is that issue?



Note to facilitator:

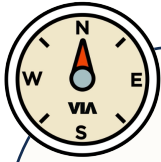
- Take some answers and write them on a chart paper or whiteboard. Here are some additional prompts to build more responses: I can't understand how someone could believe... I wish everyone agreed that... I'm not sure I could talk to someone who...

Now, imagine you were about to have a conversation with someone who disagreed with you. Tensions are high. You might feel angry. You have the urge to say something like "I just can't believe you think...You are just so wrong!" or "You're a terrible person for believing that...!"

When we feel strongly about an issue, it might feel like we need to do everything we can to get people around us to see our perspective. That is especially the case if that issue feels urgent or presents a present threat to us or the people we care about.

A heated disagreement can easily and quickly become harsh and personal. It can devolve into ad-hominem attacks, parties making fun of each other, or even demonizing one another.

Today I want to challenge us to explore, how can we practice loving-kindness toward people with whom we disagree?



EXPLORE THE VALUE: LOVING-KINDNESS

What comes to mind when you think about loving-kindness or chesed in Hebrew?

The concept of chesed appears in the Torah more than 190 times. Because of this, it is thought by many Jewish thinkers and community leaders to be Judaism's primary ethical virtue. In talks about chesed, contemporary Jewish scholar and teacher, Avivah Zornberg has said chesed is "not just loving-kindness as it's usually translated, but is also courage and imagination."

- Why do you think loving-kindness is so important within Judaism?
- In the context of a disagreement, how might practicing loving-kindness be courageous? How might it be imaginative?



Note to facilitator:

Possible answers: it might feel scary to pursue connection with someone who we feel has such different values from ours. What will other people think? What if they say something hurtful to me? Imagination helps us to envision how we might heal fractures in our relationships through loving disagreement)

- Why, if at all, might it be challenging to practice loving-kindness with people with polar opposite views from ours? Why, if at all, might it be beneficial?



JEWISH WISDOM

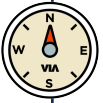
Let's look at the story of an argument that happened ages ago in a synagogue in Tiberias (a city in the northeast of Israel). In that synagogue, there was a door with a bolt that had a thick knob on its end (okay stay with me... I promise it gets more interesting!). The rabbis at the synagogue were trying to figure out whether it was considered a "vessel" and thus permissible to move it on Shabbat or whether it was considered "raw material" and therefore could not be moved on Shabbat.

Two Rabbis, Elazar and Rabbi Yosei argued over this until they became so upset that they ripped a Torah scroll in half in their anger. The Gemara interrupts the story to clarify that we must say "a Torah scroll was torn through their anger. In the heat of their debate they pulled the scroll from one side to another until it tore."

(Yevamot 96b)

30-40
min





- Imagine that you were in the room when this argument happened. What are some things you think the two rabbis might have said to each other? How might they have felt after the Torah scroll tore?
- What is your reaction to the Gemara's interruption, "we must say a Torah scroll was torn through their anger?" Why, if at all, is it helpful to clarify that the anger caused the rip rather than the two people? How, if at all, does this distinction affect your understanding of the story, and your feelings about the two rabbis?



Note to facilitator: Invite the learners to discuss the next two questions in hevruta pairs. Then come back together and take some responses.

- Think about that topic from the beginning of our gathering - the one that you felt heated about. Imagine that you were disagreeing about that topic with someone close to you, someone you wanted to stay in a relationship with. What would be challenging about that conversation? How might you avoid getting swept up in anger or the heat of the debate?
- When, if ever, do you think it is important to prioritize being right over being kind? Why?



ACTIVITY

So it might feel challenging to imagine getting riled up about a topic as mundane as whether a bolt is a vessel or raw material. But consider that the two rabbis had the common goal of preserving Jewish law. And yet, the anger they felt during the disagreement caused them to rip the holiest physical object in the synagogue.

- What might loving-kindness look like in a conversation with someone you disagree with? What would it sound like? Another way to think about it: if you were interviewing someone with the goal of empathy or curiosity, what type of questions would you want to ask?



Note to facilitator: Help learners get as specific as possible.

Possible responses:

- I am curious about... tell me more!
- How did you come to that opinion?
- Have you ever had doubts about your opinion? I'm sure there is a story there.
- So you said you're feeling... could you tell me more?
- Tell me why...?



Now, I want you to think of a “hot take” that you have: something superficial that you nonetheless feel very strongly about (for instance: The only acceptable topping for scrambled eggs is ketchup! No one actually likes frozen yogurt better than ice cream!). Take a couple minutes to write down your hot take and how you came to form that opinion (for instance: “Every Sunday morning I used to eat scrambled eggs with ketchup with my dad”, “I ate frozen yogurt when I was trying to diet but it was never satisfying enough!”).

I’m going to invite you to join your hevruta pairs from earlier. You are going to practice interviewing each other with curiosity and empathy.

First, Person 1 will share their hot take and their story of how they formed that opinion. Partner 2 will ask questions to better understand and empathize with the story behind the opinion. Then switch. The conversation might get silly, and you might even find that you agree on the hot take. That is okay. Remember to keep asking questions to better understand your partner’s story. And if you’re sharing your story, keep drawing from your own experiences. Pairs should spend around 2-3 minutes on each story.

Then reflect:

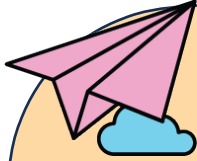
- What surprised you during that activity? What did you notice?
- Where did you experience empathy, curiosity, or perhaps even loving-kindness from your partner? When did you feel that you expressed loving-kindness? What did you learn about your partner?
- Think back to the topic from the beginning of the gathering - the one you feel heated about. What’s the story of how you came to believe what you believe about that topic? (give learners 2-3 minutes to journal about this.)



Note to Facilitator:

- It may be helpful to note for your group that sometimes it is in our best interest to leave or end a conversation in order to protect ourselves physically or psychologically, or simply because we recognize that we have reached our limit and need to draw a boundary.

5-10
min



REFLECT AND PROMPT ACTION

Thank you for being vulnerable and experimenting with interviewing each other with empathy and curiosity!

- The conversations we just had were likely relatively low stakes. You might not have even disagreed! But consider if you were talking to someone close to you. Bring a particular person to mind (a friend, family member, someone you need to work with) whom you actually do disagree with about something. What would it be like to share your story with them? To ask about their story?
- What do you want to try out the next time you disagree with that person, or someone else close to you? (Invite learners to write down their answer to this and then share out what they want to try - either in the full group or in pairs.)

Take a moment to send loving-kindness and empathy inward. It is only when we meet ourselves with curiosity, imagination, courage, and compassion, that we can practice it in our most heated disagreements.