

# Perfect timing for lessons on conflict and disagreements

The increasingly divisive quality in the Jewish community around Israel is extremely sad for me on several levels. First, as a community leader, it's harder and harder to say anything about Israel

without drawing serious fire from someone. This stifles conversation and raises the threshold for jumping into an issue like that surrounding the Gaza-bound flotilla a few weeks back.

Second, if our internal discussions of Israel are filled with division and pain, is it any wonder that young people are disengaging? Surveys show clearly that the younger a Jew is, the less their intensity of connection to Israel. That seems a great tragedy.

Finally, when we focus only on the struggle for peace in Israel and the Middle East, we lose sight of a much greater whole. Israel has other key challenges just as significant to its long-term survival. Among those issues are the income divides in Israel and the challenges of religious pluralism.

Israel also has wonderful achievements in scientific, humanitarian, literary and cultural areas. Our intense focus on one important area crowds out a much greater picture of this land and people with whom I am in love.

This week's Torah reading addresses conflicts and truly unacceptable speech and behavior. Our rabbis teach: Disagreements for the sake of heaven last forever, while those not for the sake of heaven have no lasting quality.

There are two types of arguments. Some are all about personal aggrandizement, about winning an argument or scoring a point or getting some outcome. Such arguments are "not for the sake of heaven" and only damage. They cannot stand—they disappear once the people whose self-interest they express move on to other issues. By contrast, there are disagreements based on heartfelt values and passion, a true sense of what is right. Those disagreements last forever because they matter.

When we are arguing about the importance of human rights vs. the security of Israel, I feel we are having an eternal argument for the sake of heaven. It is an argument that needs room in our community because it matters.



By contrast, when I see someone like Helen Thomas (the former White House correspondent) saying that Jews should "get the hell out of Palestine," I see an argument of personal interest that is destructive. Telling Jews to "return to Germany and Poland" without even mentioning

the Holocaust is simply hateful.

The value our tradition places on argument ought to inspire us to do the following whenever we hear something with which we disagree. First, "Sh'ma Yisrael, Hear O Israel" — we must listen and really try to understand what the other person is saying. Our tradition, as practiced, focuses us on the need to speak; the need to listen is just as vital.

Second, if upon careful listening we still strongly disagree and/or are offended, we should then look inward. Why is this creating such a strong response in me? Is there some painful inner place that this comment is exacerbating?

Third, we ought to look carefully at the motives of the speaker. Is there an underlying value, even that we see as misapplied? If the speaker, in our opinion, is exaggerating security concerns, can we still hear that person's concern for Israel and her citizens? If the person, in our opinion, is misguided around human rights issues, can we still hear the moral passion of such a cry?

Finally, if after listening attentively, after self-reflection and a careful look at motives, then at a minimum we should remember the rabbinic injunction to fight iniquity and to be pleasant with people. Polite, carefully thought-out responses are heard more clearly than invective and insult. Let our response to iniquity be informed by human dignity.

Our tradition has enabled us time and again to survive by teaching us how to talk and listen to one another. May this be a time where we rediscover the ability to drive out disagreements based on hatred and ego, while we make space for those hard conversations based on lasting value. ■