

We Need to Stay in the Conversation

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In the weeks since October 7, Jews have struggled with the question of whether to stay in community with others who hold political positions they find troubling, emotionally painful, or even harmful. Many have decided that maintaining relationships across such divides is untenable. This has undoubtedly been true among friends and family members; it has certainly also been clear in the public sphere, as rabbinic and academic leaders alike have publicly announced their temporary or permanent disaffiliation from other Jews. Some of these leaders have chosen to remove themselves from larger communities, whether an academic organization like the Association for Jewish Studies or an entire denomination. Many have also decided that certain positions, often those calling for a total ceasefire or expressing criticism as well as solidarity, are too far outside the mainstream and those that hold them should not be included in Jewish spaces—a position essentially echoing Natan Sharansky and Gil Troy’s denunciation of critics of Israel as “un-Jews” a few years ago.

In an atmosphere of increasingly visible antisemitism on the left and on campus, and, of course, in the aftermath of one of the darkest days in Jewish history in recent decades, the instinct to draw boundary lines is understandable. At this moment, however, I want to urge Jewish communal leaders, and especially fellow Jewish academics, to push themselves towards more openness and humility regarding others’ positions, as painful and difficult as that may be. I don’t expect anyone’s mind to change at this moment, and I am not even proposing “dialogue.” I do, however, urge that we do not remove ourselves from communities at moments when the conversation seems too difficult, and that we do not attempt to remove others from our communities, even those with whom we vehemently disagree. To commit to community with our ideological others, especially at a challenging time like this, allows us to live up to the best of what the college campus represents, and to embody the respect for diverse opinions that is

modeled in classical Jewish sources.

The academic community is undoubtedly in a moment of crisis. My own students in List College, the joint program between the Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia and Barnard Colleges, have faced an increasingly frayed campus atmosphere as the fall semester has unfolded. Yet, a campus moment in mid-October represents to me the great potential for our students to teach us what it means to continue showing up in communities that challenge us.

A few weeks after the October 7 massacre, an undergraduate whom I'll call Jennie sent me an email letting me know that she might be late to our Talmud class because she was at the UN, demonstrating for the return of the hostages in Gaza. Later that week, Jennie rushed out of the *beit midrash* at the end of class to help block doxing trucks on the Columbia campus. These trucks—which have appeared on the campuses of several elite colleges and are funded by a conservative organization called Accuracy in Media—broadcast the names and faces of students who signed pro-Palestine petitions. The students featured on the trucks that appeared at Columbia had signed a statement calling on their university to cut ties with “apartheid Israel,” and their personal information was displayed under the caption, “Columbia’s Leading Antisemites.” I heard later from another one of my students, “Akiva,” that many Jewish students had turned up to help block the trucks. They came armed with their bodies, with signs, and with balloons from the campus stationery store. Akiva is a List College senior, and he had been out of class the prior week after losing a close friend to a missile attack. He was so worried for his Israeli friends and family that he didn’t know how he’d manage to finish the semester. He was also the one who procured the balloons to block the trucks. He told me that it was one of the most powerful moments of his four years at college.

At a moment of fear, anger, and antisemitism on campus, why would Jewish students devote their already-stretched time and emotional energy to defend supporters of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement? I want to suggest that such a moment represents the fulfillment of the highest potential of an academic community, with an emphasis on the word *community*. My students and the pro-Palestinian students they were defending may be on opposite sides politically, but they are all young people on campus together. They sit in seminars together, they share a dining room, maybe even a bathroom. My students see faces that have been familiar to them for the last three or four years plastered on the side of a truck alongside personal information meant to endanger them, and they feel called to stand by them. In fact, I would conjecture that the Jewish juniors and seniors I teach at JTS already know what it means to be in community with people with whom they passionately disagree, because that is what college, at its best, provides.

Of course, not all passionate disagreements are created equal. As Jews have become painfully aware, some on campus are expressing their opinions in ways that seem designed to provoke, alienate, and even harm others. This is not, however, a new phenomenon, nor is it an experience

unique to Jews. The degree of colleges' responsibility to protect students (and faculty) from disagreements gone wrong has been a subject of debate for the last decade plus. Prior to this fall, the people who primarily sought protection from harmful speech in the recent past have typically been female, BIPOC, and LGBTQ students. These are demographics that have been broadly affiliated with the left, while those claiming the right to free speech, even speech that is perceived as racist, misogynist, or homophobic, have been broadly affiliated with the right. Now, strikingly, the political affiliations of those on either side of the debate have shifted, while the contours of the problem—universities' seeming inability to set clear guidelines around speech—have remained the same: Jews are seeking protection from the antisemitic speech of some people who are affiliated with the left, while, at the same time, pro-Palestinian students on campus are seeking affirmation that their right to express their opinions is protected, particularly when those opinions decry Israeli suppression of Palestinian rights. These desires should both be fulfillable, especially since there is nothing inherently antisemitic about support for Palestine.

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Yet universities seem to be struggling at this moment to figure out how to protect either of these groups. For the campus community to work the way it should, colleges must do a better job of articulating a morally cogent and consistent position regarding whose speech is protected and what that looks like—and at the same time, what it looks like to safeguard the dignity and safety of those who are affected by harmful or hateful rhetoric. This is a task for university officials, and it should be a top priority for all higher education administrators right now.

As university administrations struggle with this task, members of the academic community must figure out how to behave in the interim. Many Jews on campus right now are afraid, and many others are hurt and enraged. Some funders are pulling money; some are looking to divest from universities in other ways. Some of my colleagues in Jewish Studies are choosing not to attend the annual meetings of learned societies like the Association for Jewish Studies, the Society of Biblical Literature, and the American Academy of Religion, in protest over statements these organizations issued in the wake of October 7. What is being proposed is, essentially, a quasi-boycott of academic institutions for not showing up strongly enough for Jews—a kind of reverse

BDS.

I reject this approach. As a Talmud professor who trains future Jewish thinkers and leaders, from rabbis to lay leaders to academics, I implore Jews in and adjacent to the academy to lean into the academic community's potential to help us maintain relationships with those with whom we disagree, even at this moment, when it feels most painful. Some of our students are already powerfully demonstrating this for us—and if others are struggling to do so now, we all know of students who entered college ready to yell, were called upon to listen, and left with a wider perspective. Can the adults in the room model what it means to live up to the potential of our best and bravest students?

My own students bravely modeled what it might look like to remain connected to those with whom we differ ideologically, and even to show solidarity with them at a moment of crisis. The other side of what I am urging right now, which is to refrain from removing others from our communities due to their stated positions, is reflected in classical Jewish sources about the *halakhic* community. Many rabbinic sources discuss disagreements between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, the two groups who followed the positions of two essential early Jewish sages. These two communities were deeply opposed about many questions and took different approaches even in their behavior towards each other, yet ultimately, our sources tell us that they managed to stay within the same wider rabbinic community. For example, though Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai vehemently disagreed about certain laws pertaining to Jewish marriage, mishnah Yevamot 1:4 states that they were nevertheless willing to marry members of each other's groups. This is surprising on two levels: surprising that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai stayed in community with each other despite their extremely different views, and surprising that the rabbis who wrote about their ancestors *emphasized* their deep disagreement in both belief and practice. But presumably, the sages knew that for communities to thrive, they must commit to tolerance of opposing opinions.

Indeed, Yevamot 14a, a *sugya* (passage in the Talmud) on this mishnah, emphasizes that Beit Shammai adherents remained committed to following their own positions as practical law. The narrator of the passage in Yevamot points out that elsewhere in the Talmud, in Eruvin 13b, we learn that normative practice was established by means of a *bat kol* (heavenly voice), which stated: "These and these are the word of the living God, but the law follows Hillel." It's tempting to think that in response to this *bat kol*, Beit Shammai would have given up and capitulated to Hillel. But, as the Talmud's narrator explains, we know from the story of the Oven of Akhnai that, "We do not pay attention to a *bat kol*," and so it is perfectly reasonable to assume that Beit Shammai would have ignored it and continued with their distinctive interpretation and practice of *halakhah*. In making this point, the authors of the Talmud offer a model of a group within a larger community that persists in holding onto views that some might see as oppositional. Rather than jumping to censure the opposition, we must first ask ourselves what potentially convincing belief could be guiding their perspective. We must push ourselves to consider that they have a

good reason for maintaining their views in theory and in practice, despite their deviance from the norm.

But how can these oppositional groups continue to exist within a functional community? The Talmud's authors raise this question as well, pointing out that such behavior by Beit Shammai could well violate the prohibition on creating factions, derived from the words *lo titgodedu*, "do not cut yourselves." (Deut. 14:1) By raising this possibility, the rabbis of the Talmud nod to the competing view that what we need is unity. Those who prioritize unity might argue that staying in community with others whose positions are anathema to us will do more harm than good, since it makes the possibility of solidarity more challenging. But the Talmud's authors in the end reject this take and end up approving Beit Shammai's choice to follow their own positions *and* be in community with Beit Hillel.

A later debate between the Babylonian sages Abbaye and Rava further narrows the scope of the prohibition on factions. Abbaye states that *lo titgodedu* forbids a very specific situation: the existence of a Beit Hillel court and a Beit Shammai court in the same city. However, according to Abbaye, if there were two cities, one with a Beit Hillel court and the other with a Beit Shammai court, that would not be a problem for Judaism as a whole. According to this position, then, the existence of factions is fine as long as each faction has some control over their own specific domain, and the two factions thus remain separate. But Rava then objects, arguing that "a Beit Hillel court and a Beit Shammai court in the same city is exactly what the Beit Hillel/Beit Shammai dispute was like!" The principle of *lo titgodedu* cannot apply to a situation of differing courts in the same city—because everyone knows that the model case of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai was, essentially, two courts in the same city. Though they disagreed, they didn't draw apart from each other completely, but continued to occupy common ground despite their disputes.

Rava then argues that the prohibition on factions applies only to the establishment of a single court, half of which rules according to Beit Hillel and the other half according to Beit Shammai. This type of court—which, in the rabbinic legal system, would be dysfunctional and unable to rule on practical matters—is, on Rava's read, the only "factionalism" prohibited by *lo titgodedu*. That means that a single city with both a Beit Hillel court and a Beit Shammai court (i.e., one community whose members maintain ideologically opposing views) is allowed.

In this *sugya*, then, Rava understands "don't make factions" to mean "don't set up a single court divided to the degree that it is unable to make decisions." I want to suggest that Rava's (somewhat tortured) reading of this prohibition means that he doesn't just think a city with a Beit Hillel court and a Beit Shammai court is tolerable, he thinks it is an important ideal. In this vision, the two factions do continue to exist within the same community, each with their own understanding of what is right, and yet sharing civic space every day. What might it look like to follow Hillel and Shammai and continue to live in a city with multiple courts? Sharing a city

certainly doesn't need to mean each group must endorse the other. It might look like adherents of the two courts marrying one another, but it need not. (Indeed, as the Talmud points out later on the same page, Hillelites at times did reject marriages with Shammaites when they came into direct conflict with their own accepted views.) It means entering communal space—perhaps just marketplaces, bathhouses, and bakeries—knowing that there are people in the room with you who have different beliefs and their own legitimate reasons for them, though you, for your own legitimate reasons, think that they are wrong. It means treating those people with respect and expecting that they will treat you with respect.

I want to suggest that we use the driving force of this *sugya* as a model for how we relate to people in our own communities. Over and over, the authors of the *sugya* raise the possibility that Beit Shammai has gone too far in rejecting Beit Hillel's views, only to bend over backwards to find a way to understand why they might have a good reason to do so. Crucially, the rabbis of the Talmud do not suggest that Beit Hillel must think that Beit Shammai is right, or vice versa. There is no question that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai are entitled to disagree with each other, and, presumably, they are entitled to be upset by the other's opinions. We can learn from this *sugya* by remembering that we need to extend some intellectual empathy towards those whose views might offend or upset us, and consider in a serious, non-patronizing way why they might think the way they do.

I hope to see Jews modeling this kind of intellectual humility at all levels of the academic community, from department meetings to annual conferences. But the first place we can start is at home, within Jewish Studies departments and in other Jewish institutional spaces as well. Instead of moving immediately to draw boundary lines—and to be sure, lines must be drawn somewhere; even a big tent must have its limits—we can learn from Hillel and Shammai, from Rava, and from the model of the classroom, to approach each other with a posture of inclusivity and curiosity. What would it look like to ask, not rhetorically but honestly and respectfully: Why do you use that term? Why do you feel called to react that way in this moment? What does that slogan mean to you? What is the Torah that is driving your choices?

The entire academic project is, to a great extent, about the fostering of respectful disagreement, whether that happens in the classroom, in the faculty lounge, or in the pages of peer-reviewed journals. Though we all know that sometimes disagreements can go off the rails, they are also the only way that scholarship can move forward and, I would argue, the only way that learning can happen, and that truly functional communities can exist. And as we have seen in Hillel and Shammai's shared city and on my students' campus, functional communities are ones in which people show up and encounter each other face to face. It's easier to yell at someone online, write an angry letter about a statement, or tweet antisemitic vitriol than it is to go up to someone you will have to see again tomorrow and say what you think out loud. This is exactly why it is so crucial to invest in those shared communities, whether that looks like supporters of Israel

showing up to an academic conference, members of a pro-ceasefire Peace Bloc showing up to an Israel rally, or simply any individual returning to the faculty lounge or the synagogue the day after someone there said something that horrified them. And for the sake of preserving community, we must look out for one another at a basic human level, including and especially on campus: Jewish students oppose the doxing of pro-Palestinian students, and people who oppose Israel's actions should likewise be concerned about the safety of Jewish students on campus.

In what is undoubtedly a frightening time, we must be like the sages, like our best students, and like our best selves: we must try to articulate our own positions as clearly as possible; we must maintain faith that many other people's positions are also rational; and we must try to understand them and even support them, to whatever degree we can, while maintaining our own intellectual integrity. It is the only way we can move forward.

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