

THESE AND THOSE ARE THE WORDS OF THE LIVING GOD

EMBRACING VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

BIG QUESTION: IS VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY A “FEATURE” OR A “BUG”?

This discussion will consider the positive value of viewpoint diversity. Using both secular and Jewish texts, it will allow participants to consider why the existence of diverse and conflicting “truths” is a necessary part of human (and Jewish) experience.

NAME TAGS:

For at least the first several sessions, 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 watch the video (see below) and read through the texts, to get a sense of which ones you would like to prioritize. Then see where the discussion leads you!

DISTRIBUTING THE VIDEO CONTENT:

The primary secular “text” for this session is a 15-minute TED Talk by Kathryn Shulz. A link to the video recording of this talk is available on the CORE Groups page of the Central Synagogue website. A few days before your meeting, you should contact your group members to ask them to view the video. (It is helpful to include a link in your email). In order to keep the talk fresh in everyone’s minds, you may wish to recommend that participants make a note of any questions or reactions they have immediately after watching it.

INTRODUCTION AND ICE-BREAKER:

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

- (a) their name; AND
- (b) one thing that you think sets you apart from many people at Central Synagogue; OR
- (c) something you have recently been completely wrong about.

OPENING ACTIVITY: HUMAN BAROMETER EXERCISE

The purpose of this exercise is for your group members to recognize how their views are similar and/or different with respect to a range of potentially divisive issues. It is likely that there will be near unanimity on some questions, and greatly diverging opinions on others.

For this activity, you will need some open space for people to move around, and stand in a line. You will be making a series of statements, and asking participants to physically arrange themselves in a line along a continuum.

Label one end of the room “AGREE” and the other “DISAGREE.” Let participants know that you will be asking them to position themselves between two extremes, in response to a series of questions. They should remain where they have placed themselves until the next question is asked. *Instruct the participants that this will be a silent activity*, but assure them that there will be time to talk about it afterward.

You need not ask all of these questions, and may substitute your own if you like. (The first few are designed to break the ice and clarify how the exercise works)

- 1) I am a morning person.
- 2) I am a pessimist.
- 3) I enjoy arguing.
- 4) I tend to hold grudges.
- 5) Racial profiling should always be illegal, even if it works.
- 6) If you work really hard in America, you can be successful.
- 7) America should do more to control illegal immigration.
- 8) The US should admit more Syrian refugees.
- 9) We should have single-payer healthcare paid for by taxes.
- 10) I experience God in my everyday life.
- 11) The only moral solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a two-state solution.
- 12) Jews should be encouraged to marry other Jews.
- 13) Racism is a significant problem in the Jewish community.
- 14) Life would be better in America if the top 1% paid more taxes.
- 15) The death penalty is appropriate in some circumstances.
- 16) It is worth giving up some privacy in order to be safer.
- 17) I feel inspired by Israel.
- 18) I think race relations are much better now than they were 20 years ago.
- 19) It is important to me that Israel have a Jewish majority.
- 20) I feel safe and accepted in the world as a Jew.
- 21) I believe Israel’s settlement policies in the West Bank are self-destructive.
- 22) Strict enforcement of drug laws is necessary to keep people safe.

- 23) Marijuana should be legalized.
- 24) Ideally, Jewish children should attend Jewish day schools.
- 25) Life was better 25 years ago than it is today.
- 26) I feel uncomfortable when people use the word “occupation” to describe the situation in Israel.
- 27) I feel uncomfortable when I hear people criticize Islam.
- 28) I feel uneasy around orthodox Jews.
- 29) I think it is wrong for Jews to have a Christmas tree in their home.
- 30) I think my synagogue focuses too much on politics these days.
- 31) I think transgender children should be assigned to the bunk that matches their biological sex when they go to summer camp.
- 32) Working for justice is an important part of my Jewish identity.

At the end of the exercise, you may want to ask your participants one or more of the following questions:

- (a) How did it feel choosing a spot to stand?
- (b) What did you notice?
- (c) What surprised you?
- (d) On which issues was there a greater consensus? Where did views differ the most?

TEXT STUDY

Attached is a text-study sheet that you may use to facilitate a conversation about the Jewish ideal of constructive disagreement. 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.

BARUCH atah, Adonai
Eloheinu, Melech haolam,
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי
אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

BLESSED ARE YOU, Adonai our God,
Sovereign of the universe,
who hallows us with mitzvot,
commanding us to engage with words of 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

The next discussion in this series will focus on learning from those with whom we may disagree. The Viewpoint Diversity Experience (created in collaboration with Jonathan Haidt) has gathered materials that represent "liberal" and "conservative" viewpoints, so that participants can explore the ideas of "the other side." Please ask your group members to go to the Viewpoint Diversity Experience website, to the section entitled "Venturing 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). Ask them to make a note of their reaction to this piece, so that you can discuss it next time.

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.
- (c) Ask each person to name one practice they would like to try between now and the next meeting.