

THE BEIT MIDRASH WAY - EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

Background

One fact people across political divides today may still agree upon is that civil discourse between the political divides is turning less and less civil. Indeed, the sheer lack of desire to try to understand those with opposing political opinions (or political identities) and disagree constructively over critical questions is posing an existential threat to democracies around the world.

In response, Pardes has created this new initiative: Mahloket Matters: How to Disagree Constructively—The Beit Midrash Way. At the core of the traditional *beit midrash*, study hall, are *havrutot*, study pairs, critically studying together *mahloket*, conflicting opinions, found on every page of classic Jewish texts. The roots of the *beit midrash* culture may be found in the ancient rabbinic legend that tells how Moses received a Torah full of ambiguities that needed to be interpreted in contradictory ways known as the 49 vs 49. This methodology of studying text can be used to increase the desire and ability to understand and engage more constructively with conflicting political opinions today, thereby improving civil discourse.

The Mahloket Matters series is complete with graphically designed source sheets, a video educators' guide and short videos to be used as part of each of the five sessions. Each of the units brings a biblical story, conflicting commentaries on that story, historical events and recent news. The unit videos are each approximately 15 minutes long and show Rabbi Dr. Daniel Roth and Rabba Yaffa Epstein modeling *havruta* and *mahloket l'shem shamayim* (disagreement for the sake of Heaven).

Mahloket Matters is designed to be suitable for your synagogue, federation, campus school and communal study group.

Pardes is proud to be partnering with OpenMind (www.OpenMindPlatform.org), an initiative of NYU Prof. Jonathan Haidt, an internationally acclaimed scholar of civil discourse. OpenMind is a psychology-based educational platform designed to depolarize campuses, companies, organizations, and communities. OpenMind helps people foster intellectual humility and mutual understanding, while equipping them with the essential cognitive skills to engage constructively across differences. All participants in Mahloket Matters will be encouraged to participate in one of the five steps of OpenMind after each unit of Mahloket Matters. Pardes and OpenMind are also jointly assessing their impact on participants and communities.

Remember to invite your participants to complete the OpenMind pre-assessment before or at the start of your first meeting. An email with instructions should have been received within 2 days of registration. If you did not receive it or have questions, please contact Elisheva Blum at elishevab@pardes.org.il.

Unit Titles

- **Introduction** - Rabbinic Concepts of the Beit Midrash Way
- **Unit 1 – Meet or Refuse to Meet?**
From Korah and Moses to Political Adversaries Today
- **Unit 2 – Fear War or Trust Peace?**
From Jacob and Esau through Chamberlain and Menachem Begin to Today
- **Unit 3 – Xenophobia or National Security?**
From Pharaoh and the Israelites through Japanese Internment to Today
- **Unit 4 – Coexist or Separate?** From Isaac and Ishmael to Israelis and Palestinians Today
- **Unit 5 – “Fake News” or Uncovering the Truth?**
From Joseph and his brothers through Jefferson and Hamilton to Today
- **Sanhedrin Way** - a mock-constructive controversy exercise using the conflict scenario, “Keep or cancel the controversial speaker? You Decide!”

Each Unit Contains

Source sheets

Each unit comes with graphically designed source sheets that can be used with your community. The source sheets are currently available online in .pdf format. You may either print them or forward them to your participants.

A Video

Each unit comes with a short video (approx. 15 min long) that can be used with your participants as part of the educational workshop. Each video features Rabbi Dr. Daniel Roth, Director of the Pardes Center for Judaism and Conflict Resolution, and Rabba Yaffa Epstein, Pardes’s Director of Education, North America, studying in *havruta* and modeling how to engage in *mahloket* constructively. Their discussion matches the Text Study in the sourcesheets, thereby providing the basic educational experience via expert Pardes teachers.

Educators' Videos

Each unit also comes with an educator’s video designed to familiarize you with all the sources, including the many supplementary sources that can be referred to during the educational workshop.

UNIT STRUCTURE FOR EACH OF THE FIVE UNITS

Central Unit Question

Each unit opens with a central conceptual question (called an *ibaya lehu*) currently under political debate today. For example, “When do we agree to meet with our political adversaries, and when do we refuse?” or “When should we trust the sincerity of our enemy’s intentions to make peace, and when should we not?”

Text Study 1

Witnessing the Shared “Facts” of the Biblical Story

The unit then explores the central question through the study of a biblical conflict story. For example, Korah and his followers’ refusal to meet with Moses, or Jacob being afraid in anticipation of meeting his brother Esau, whom he had not seen for over twenty years.

Exercise 1

Writing our ‘Intuitive Tweet’

One pillar of the Beit Midrash Way is the ability to be aware of our own bias that lead us to interpret a particular text or conflict the way we do. This exercise challenges participants to become more aware of their bias, and how it often plays out on social media through writing “our intuitive tweet” about the biblical story.

Text Study 2

Understanding the 49 vs 49 Conflicting Interpretations of the Facts of the Biblical Story (study of biblical commentaries)

After carefully analyzing the verses of the biblical story, which serves as the “shared facts,” various interpretations of these facts are then introduced through the study of the classic commentaries on the story. These commentaries each portray the characters in the story in conflicting ways, often in accordance with their own bias.

Exercise 2

Writing the 49 vs 49 Faces of the Book

Another pillar of the 'Beit Midrash Way' is the ability to understand contradictory interpretations of texts as well as ideological and political issues today. In this exercise participants are challenged to understand contradictory narratives through writing two social media posts—one for each of the two conflicting characters in the biblical conflict story based upon the participants' own interpretations and the commentaries studied.

Text Study 3

Historical Precedents

Each unit then examines conflicting historical precedents that can be used to support or refute opposing responses to the central question of the unit.

Exercise 3

Studying Today's News 'The Beit Midrash Way'

Each unit concludes with a practical exercise called "Studying the News 'The Beit Midrash Way'". This exercise features a case study of two news sources reporting on the same recent event in which the unit's central question came up. It seeks to challenge participants to be aware of their own bias, identify the shared facts as well as the conflicting interpretations of these facts.

Note that in most cases, only the links to the news articles are included. You may want to look at the articles ahead of time and to make sure you have devices connected to the internet during the session. Furthermore, feel free to use other examples of current events for the exercise.

Supplementary Sources

Each unit comes with a selection of supplementary sources that can be used with participants or referred to by the educator. These include, for example, additional commentaries on the biblical conflict story.

MAHLOKET MATTERS

HOW TO DISAGREE CONSTRUCTIVELY



The 9Adar Project
Jewish Week of Constructive Conflict
WWW.9ADAR.ORG

Overview Of Mahloket Matters Units

Unit Title	Central Question	Text Study 1: Biblical Story	Text Study 2: Commentaries	Text Study 3: Historical Precedents	Exercise: News Today
Introduction: Rabbinic Concepts of the Beit Midrash Way					
Unit 1 - Meet or Refuse to Meet? From Korah and Moses to Political Adversaries Today	When do we agree to meet with our political adversaries, and when do we refuse?	Numbers 16:1-2, 12-15	Rashi, Rashbam and Hirsch		Athletes refusing to meet Presidents at White House
Unit 2 - Fear War or Trust Peace? From Jacob and Esau through Chamberlain and Menachem Begin to Today	When should we trust the sincerity of our enemy's intentions to make peace, and when should we not?	Genesis 32:4-8	Abarbanel, Shadal	Chamberlain trusting Hitler, 1938 and M. Begin trusting Sadat, 1977	PM Netanyahu UN speech, September 2018
Unit 3 - Xenophobia or National Security? From Pharaoh and the Israelites through Japanese Internment to Today	When is fearing minorities xenophobia, and when is it a question of national security?	Exodus 1:8-12	Anchor Bible, Book of Jubilees and Shadal	Japanese internment in US/ Canada WWII and Sudeten Germans in WWII	President Trump quoting President Obama about building a security Fence/ Wall, October 24, 2018
Unit 4 - Coexist or Separate? From Isaac and Ishmael to Israelis and Palestinians Today	When can we coexist with "the other", and when do we need to separate to protect our own?	Genesis 21:8-13	Iben Ezra, Elie Wiesel and Rashi	Implications for the children of Isaac and Ishmael today	Stabbing and Shooting in Hebron, October 22, 2018
Unit 5 - "Fake News" or Uncovering the Truth? From Joseph and his brothers through Jefferson and Hamilton to Today	When is negative reporting "fake news", and when is it simply uncovering the truth?	Genesis 37:2-4	Rashi and Rashbam	UK PM John Major vs. New Statesman and President Jefferson vs. Harry Crosswell	NY Times Op-Ed, September 5, 2018.
Sanhedrin Way - Learn texts and theory about how to disagree constructively by studying the procedures of the ancient Sanhedrin. Practice engaging in constructive disagreement using a mock-Sanhedrin exercise.					



Introduction: Rabbinic Concepts of the Beit Midrash Way

The Introduction is designed to be only part of one educational workshop. It is important to do this Introduction before doing the other units. While it can be done before any of the module units, it is best to do with Unit 1 since this unit is intentionally a bit shorter than the rest to allow time for the introduction to the series.

The introduction to the Beit Midrash Way is flexible in terms of how much time you would like to invest in it.

30min Introduction Lesson Plan

1. Introduction (5min):
 - Welcome participants
 - Watch first 2 min. of the Introduction video (then press pause)
2. *Havruta* (10min):
 - The Rabbinic Concepts of the 49 vs 49
3. The Rabbinic Concept of *Mahloket L'Shem Shamayim* (Disagreement for the sake of Heaven)
 - Participants can also look at the supplementary sources if they have time.
4. Group Discussion (5min):
 - Review list of questions and comments on the two core concepts.
5. Watch the remainder of the Introduction video (10min)
6. Continue with first Unit (1–5)

15min Introduction Lesson Plan

1. Welcome participants (3min)
2. Watch the Introduction video (12min)
3. Continue with first Unit (1–5)

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5–7min Introduction Lesson Plan

1. Welcome participants
2. Educator reads and reflects with participants on the two core rabbinic concepts briefly (after having previously watched introduction video and educator guide video).
3. Continue with first Unit (1-5)

60min Introduction Lesson Plan

- If you would like to spend an entire session or two just on the two core rabbinic concepts you are welcome to use the following links:
 - **Core Rabbinic Concept of the 49 vs 49:**
www.elmad.pardes.org/49vs49
 - **Core Rabbinic Concept of Disagreement for the Sake of Heaven:**
www.elmad.pardes.org/g-dcast

Conclusion to The Beit Midrash Way

At the very end of Unit 5 – “Fake” News or Uncovering the Truth, there is a short concluding text. If you are not ending your series with Unit 5, you can use this text to conclude your series. However, it is more naturally embedded into Unit 5.

Ask participants to complete the post-assessment survey and any remaining steps in OpenMind.

Mahloket Matters – The Sanhedrin Way

Consider doing a mock-Sanhedrin exercise using the conflict scenario appropriate for your community.



UNITS 1–5 LESSON PLANS

The Beit Midrash Way Units are all modular, and you are welcome to do them in which ever order you please. They are also designed to be flexible in timing, and you can modify them to be anywhere between 60–120min. The following are suggested lesson plans for how to use them within different time frames.

60min. Unit 1–5 Lesson Plan

1. Introduction to unit (5min):
 - Welcome participants
 - Watch first 2min of the unit video (then press pause).
2. *Havruta* (10min):
 - Text Study 1- Witnessing the Shared “Facts” of the Biblical Story
 - Exercise 1 – Writing My “Intuitive Tweet”
3. Group Discussion #1 (25min):
 - Review list of questions on the biblical verses.
 - Review 'intuitive tweets' of participants.
 - Read as a group the commentaries in Text Study 2 “Understanding the 49 vs 49 Conflicting Interpretations of the Facts of the Biblical Story”.
4. Watch unit video (10min):
 - Watch the remainder of the unit video.
5. Group Discussion #2 (10min):
 - Ask and discuss where this unit’s question comes up today in people’s personal lives or in politics and to what extent do people feel they can honestly understand the conflicting perspectives around it.
 - Sight as an example the two news articles brought in Exercise 3 “Studying Today’s News ‘the Beit Midrash Way’.”
6. Conclusion:
 - Thank everyone for participating
 - Remind participants to complete next step in their OpenMind app before next unit (about 15min).

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90–120min. Unit 1-5 Lesson Plan

1. Introduction (5min):

- Welcome participants
- Watch first 2min of the unit video (then press pause).

2. Havruta #1 (10min):

- Text Study 1- Witnessing the Shared “Facts” of the Biblical Story
- Exercise 1 – Writing My “Intuitive Tweet”

3. Group Discussion #1 (10–15min):

- Review list of questions on the biblical verses.
- Review participant’s ‘intuitive tweets’.

4. Havruta #2 (30–45min):

- Text Study 2 – “Understanding the 49 vs 49 Conflicting Interpretations of the Facts of the Biblical Story”.
- Exercise 2 – Writing the 49 vs 49 Faces of the Book
- If participants still have time, encourage them to review Text Study 3 “Historical Precedents” or some of the Supplementary Sources found at the back of each unit’s source sheet.

5. Group Discussion #2 (20–30min):

- Discuss commentaries on the Bible (including, historical precedents, and supplementary sources).
- Review participants social media posts. You may also wish to have people use sticky-notes on a big board/wall or an electronic format to share their posts.

6. Watch unit video (10min):

- Watch the remainder of the unit video
- Introduce Exercise 3

7. Havruta #3 (5–10min):

- Exercise 3 – Studying the News ‘The Beit Midrash Way’

8. Group Discussion #3 (10–20min):



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- Discuss Exercise 3
- Ask and discuss where else this unit's question comes up today in people's personal lives or in politics and to what extent do people feel they can honestly understand the conflicting perspectives around it.

9. Conclusion:

- Thank everyone for participating
- Remind participants to complete the next step in their OpenMind app

When Internet Is Not Available

Those that choose to run the program when an internet connection is not available (because of Shabbat observance or other reasons) are encouraged to watch both the unit video and the educator's video prior to the session. You may choose to review the news articles as well. It is suggested that you note all the points you would like to bring up. The exercises can all be discussed verbally if writing is not an option. Regardless, it is suggested that source sheets are printed or forwarded to each participant prior to the session.

