

Can text study improve civil discourse today?

Introducing *Mahloket Matters: How to Disagree Constructively - The Beit Midrash Way*

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 democracy.

In response, the Pardes Center for Judaism and Conflict Resolution (PCJCR) has created a 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. 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.

Mahloket Matters is a five-part educational-workshop series available for rabbis, educators, Hillel professionals, high school teachers and others to use in their own communities. The 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. The videos feature Rabbi Dr. Daniel Roth, Director of PCJCR and Rabba Yaffa Epstein, Pardes's Director of Education, North America, studying in *havruta* and modeling how to engage in *mahloket* constructively.

Each unit examines a central question currently under political debate, such as "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?" These central questions are first analyzed through a biblical conflict story, such as 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. After carefully analyzing 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 contradictory ways, often in accordance with their own bias. Each unit then examines contradictory historical precedents that can be used to support or refute opposing responses to the central question of the unit.

The units each conclude with a different practical activity designed to inspire and empower participants to understand and engage more constructively with opposing political views, whether they encounter them in personal interactions, social media or in the news.

The *Mahloket Matters* series has been generously sponsored by Ronald Guttman, Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah and the EGL Charitable Foundation. The series is set to be launched in December 2018.

To learn more and register:
pardes.org.il/mm

