



"The Cracks of Discourse: Lessons from Jewish Tradition and Modern Conflict"

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In his book on the weekly Torah portion, *Simchat Torah*, which also happens to be the name of the annual holiday that we observe at the end of Sukkot, the late Israeli poet, lyricist, and author, Yoram Taharlev, offers a humorous story that illustrates the nature of disagreement in Jewish culture. He recounted:

“A British tourist plane was forced to make an emergency landing deep in the jungle, in an area inhabited by a tribe of cannibals. The cannibals quickly rushed to grab a tourist for their lunch. Immediately, the chief stood before them and called out: 'Don't touch them! We will put them in the fattening camp for a month, feed them well, and after they fatten up nicely, then we will eat them.'

The tribe agreed with the chief's advice, and after a month, they held a great feast and ate all the tourists. They were happy they took his advice. A week later, another plane landed in the same jungle, this time all the stranded tourists were Jewish. The cannibals rushed to catch them and bring them to the fattening camp. The chief stood up and shouted: 'Are you crazy? They're Jews! If you put them together in one camp, they'll end up eating each other!'"

Taharlev's story, that unsavory metaphor, playfully highlights the nature of Jewish self-criticism and internal conflict. It humorously suggests that if stranded Jewish tourists were placed together, they would metaphorically "consume" each other through disagreements and disputes.

Indeed, Judaism is a religion based on discourse, disagreement, and the encouragement of dialogue. This is a central thesis of our rabbis in the Talmud. In fact, it often seemed as if the rabbis could agree on only one thing: to disagree. Most of us have already heard the saying: "Two Jews, three opinions." That is the way it has always been. However, the rabbis in the Talmud always respected opposing arguments. It is widely documented that the School of Hillel required their students to first learn the school of Shammai's position, before offering their own, as a sign of respect and understanding of the opposing opinions.



In an interview a couple of months ago, former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett claimed that Jews have already built the Third Temple, metaphorically, with the creation of the modern State of Israel. However, he also warned that the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed because of baseless hatred—because Jews lacked respect for one another, which led to outrage and destruction. Bennett then referred to a couple of events in Israel prior to the October 7th massacre. One was in reference to the discourse surrounding judicial reform and concerns about its impact on Israeli democracy. Much hatred was expressed on the streets of Israel between those on the extremes of wanting a large judicial overhaul, and those wanting the status quo unchanged. Members of the reserves gave ultimatums. The tensions were so high, that people in the nuanced middle were barely noticed, unlike the clash of the rigid who were very much noticed, too much so, by our enemies, who looked to exploit the division. Bennett was also referring to the divisive attitude among Diaspora Jews regarding Israel and the right of Jews to self-determination in their ancestral land. History has shown us that when we are divided, especially with intense hostility, a vacuum is created, and our enemies exploit it.

Bennett has been concerned that today, Jewish Israelis and Jews around the world are on the verge of a similar destruction, tearing ourselves apart with misunderstanding and disagreement. Bennett supported his remarks by quoting a passage from the historian, Joseph ben Matityahu (Flavius Josephus), from two thousand years ago. Vespasian, the commander of the Roman army, stood with his generals just before the conquest of the Old City and said, "If we give them more time, our enemies' numbers will decrease. The fire of discord will consume them." In other words, while the Jews were consumed by internal conflict, they brought upon themselves the terrible curse of civil war that would lead to a decrease in population. Vespasian believed it was better to watch from afar and let the Jews destroy themselves than to waste energy and intervene in their anger.

With that, Bennett concluded that, and I quote, "If the Arabs were truly smart, they would have waited a little longer and not attacked Israel on October 7th. We would have caused ourselves more damage."



This attitude of disrespect and hatred of one another is evident in many U.S. and European universities these days, where arguments should be won through dialogue, not hostile activism like that which creates artificial borders on campuses that prevent Jewish students from walking through them, through parts of their own campus. In academia, we expect our students and professors to engage in honest dialogue and study, winning arguments through education and historical facts, just as the rabbis did two millennia ago in their schools. I strongly recommend that educational institutions today learn from the wisdom of our rabbis, particularly the two main schools of thought—Hillel and Shammai—by providing an occasional format in which two professors, with opposing views, could present their sides, in the classroom, auditorium or Zoom setting, with moments to fact check. This approach would allow students to engage in the conversation and make their own decisions, rather than having professors impose their personal, and increasingly toxic, agendas. The more students would understand one another, even if they disagree with one another, the more stability there will be on campuses. Unfortunately, the discord we've been seeing is quite deliberate. The forces seeking to harm the Jewish people, especially Jewish students and professors, are also seeking to erode the credibility and integrity of our established colleges and universities, in the United States and throughout the Western world.

In one of his final songs, "You Want It Darker," Leonard Cohen encapsulated a famous Jewish mystical doctrine with the phrase, "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." There is a Jewish tradition that teaches that each person is a unique small light, and this light shines when we are kind to each other and care for one another. The cracks in this scenario are good. When we are not behaving civilly to each other, too few, or no cracks are available for the light to shine through, allowing darkness to overpower.

These beneficial cracks can only be created through civil discourse—when we listen to one another and remain open to new information. This openness lets the light of knowledge enter our lives, and helps us grow as individuals and as a community. When we fail to engage in discourse and dialogue with differing points of view, we remain untouched and self-centered, unwilling to understand other opinions, or even know how people arrived at those opinions. This leads to



narrow-mindedness, increases the distance between people and is conducive to antagonism and violence.

As seen in the past, Jews have the power to destroy themselves through baseless hatred, and refusal to understand or entertain others' opinions. But we have also unified and accomplished some incredible things, with collaborations that have led to advanced medical technology, peaceful coexistence and more.

As we embark on the New Jewish Year of 5785, let us remember the importance of preserving unity, stopping hatred, and viewing those with opposing views from a place of honesty, as fellow members of our shared community. May we live together with our disagreements but remain united. And let us say: Amen.