

When I first saw the email about Israel conversations, I was really excited.

At last I could give everyone the benefit of my “wise words” about Israel and middle east violence. In my imagination, everyone would be blown away by the simple elegance of my arguments. Everyone would agree with my point of view. Temple Emunah members would be united in their attitude. Peace in the Middle East would be sure to follow! And then world peace!

Of course, that’s not what Israel conversations is about. I knew that. It’s about listening.

I was actually really excited to get to listen to opposing views, in a format that was more than throwing slogans, or watching the talking heads on TV spout the party line. So I went into this really looking forward to listening to what other people were going to say, and determined to try to not say much myself, to not try to persuade anybody of anything.

The first thing that struck me about these conversations was that people’s opinions about Israel were not at all what I was expecting. (And I’m talking here about the security situation, problems with the

Palestinians, settlement, and so on, because that's where the difficulty lies when we talk about Israel.)

What I learned was that there are many people whose opinions are pretty close to mine. Maybe it was self-selection: the kind of person who is attracted to this conversation process is the kind of person who is more centrist or dove-ish; or maybe there's this silent majority out there, who really do have very nuanced views, and it's all just drowned out by the extremes.

Whatever the case, what I learned in those conversations was that I thought my opinions were in a small minority, but actually there was a lot of agreement among the people there. Mostly, agreement that there's no obvious right answer to anything; that it's OK if our own opinions change and contradict each other. And that if I thought my opinions made me a bit marginal here, well, I'm really not.

The other thing that really struck me was how well this process worked. There was one specific instance that really has stuck with me.

I have a particular opinion about something that I really don't like to bring up at *shul*, or amongst other Jews. It's really that strong. I think

I'm right, but it really would provoke a very strong negative reaction (I'm not even going to describe it here). But that setting, the group I was talking with, and the formalism of the process, made me feel safe enough to say what I think.

But that's not even the extraordinary thing.

Someone in the group immediately said that they have to respond to what I said. "Nope, sorry," said our facilitator. "That's not how it works. We're going to carry on, other people will be saying their thoughts on the subject, and maybe we'll come back to this in a while." Well, when we came back to it, that person who had such a strong initial reaction said, "You know what? I still don't totally agree with you. But maybe there's some truth in there after all. I need to think about that some more."

I ask you, where does that happen? That doesn't happen. It blew my mind. I don't think I've ever seen that before or since. That someone had a strong negative reaction to something I said, and then a few minutes later thought that maybe there's some truth in it.

If that's what this process can do, we need more of it.

So where to go from here? Well I'm just a participant. I don't have the skills to be able to create and run an event like this. Yes, let's have more of these events. I really hope there is another Israel Conversations event this year. I'll be there, and I encourage you to come.

But if I were one of the people behind this process, I would be looking to the internet. What if the principles that helped people talk so productively to each other in person, could be transferred to Facebook, to Twitter, to message boards? Imagine if that divisive mess of social media had a little corner where people used the same practices we used, to talk to each other productively.

Wouldn't that be great? Maybe then we'd have peace in the Middle East. And world peace would follow.