

Is it possible to have a meaningful conversation with people whose views, beliefs, and attitudes are so different from mine? People whose views and beliefs trigger strong reactions for me? When we have strong emotional reactions to something, it is easy to forget that we have a choice about how we respond.

In the parshah this week, we witness how Judah responded to Joseph's demand that Benjamin remain in Egypt. Clearly, Judah was very upset about this demand. And yet we witness him responding thoughtfully, and carefully. Yes, there is passion and emotion in his words. But the passion and emotion are restrained by a clarity about what he most wants to communicate to Joseph. We can imagine that Judah needed to take some time to calm himself and reflect before he spoke to Joseph. I imagine that he took some time to feel the impact of what was being demanded: his fear for Benjamin, his fear for the impact on their father Jacob, the fear of how this powerful man might react if he refused to leave Benjamin there.

Perhaps his first reaction, even before the fear, was anger. I imagine him saying to himself, "I can't believe this man is asking such a thing! How dare he! How cruel to demand such a thing! Okay, but I can't respond with anger. Oh my God, what am I going to do? What will happen to Benjamin if we leave him here? I can't do that! And

what would happen to our father if I don't bring Benjamin home? I can't do that! But if I say no, what will this man do? He could have us all killed! Okay, I need to breathe and calm myself and take time to reflect. How can I respond to this man so that he understands why I can't do this? What can I say to him that will get him to understand? I know, I will speak from my heart and I will offer my life instead of Benjamin."

We see from Joseph's response that Judah was indeed effective in how he responded. However, restraining our immediate reaction isn't easy when we aren't faced with the immediate threat of death as Judah was.

We have all experienced this many times, with those closest to us, as well as in reaction to those who we see as our enemies, or those we see as dangerously misguided.

Someone close to us does something that hurts us, or annoys us, or frustrates us, and we react, without thought. And perhaps they react to us just as quickly. And then before you can say your own name things have escalated and you are watching yourself in an argument that you can't seem to stop, wondering how you got there.

Or you are in a conversation with someone about politics, perhaps about Israel and the Palestinians, and then suddenly the other person says something so outrageous, so dangerously misguided, that you react with a fierce annoyance, and a disbelief, how could this person believe such nonsense! And your whole being is caught up in an argument. Or else, you walk away as fast you can and vow to never talk with that person again. At least not about Israel.

When we have strong emotional reactions to something, it is easy to forget that we have a choice about how we respond.

Yet, in spite of how strong the impulse to react is, we do have a choice. We can restrain the impulse. We can pause and breathe, and remind ourselves that we can listen to our own feelings and reactions internally before reacting or responding externally. We can remind ourselves that there is more to me than this part of me that wants to react impulsively. I can acknowledge that part of me and listen to it. I can choose to reflect and I can choose to be curious. Wow! Why am I reacting so strongly? What about this was so triggering for me? And perhaps I can even be curious about the other person. What might have led them to say or do what they just said or did?

And then, after this pause, and a few moments to listen to myself, I can choose to have a different kind of conversation. A conversation with the intention of mutual understanding.

This isn't easy, because in spite of how much education we have had, most of us have never learned how to have this kind of conversation with someone who we have a strong disagreement with.

And we live in a time in our political world and our culture where the opposite of this kind of conversation is the rule. People demean and dehumanize the people they disagree with. People hang out with the people they agree with and bemoan the horrible people who they see as threatening their way of life.

Constructive Conversations about Israel is a program sponsored by the Israel Committee that gives us an opportunity to have a calm and respectful conversation with people whose views and comments trigger us. Rather than avoid talking to them, or argue with them in a way that leaves you both frustrated and alienated, you can talk with people in a way that lets you both feel heard and understood.

The key to this is the shift from trying to change someone's mind to focusing on mutual understanding. Many different views get to coexist as we explore the complexity of what leads us to believe what we believe.

There are two skills that are fundamental to this process. One is listening deeply with an open mind. Listening with curiosity, rather than thinking about how you want to counter what the other person is saying.

The second is asking good questions. Questions that invite the other person to go deeper; to reflect and share what led them to the positions and beliefs they hold. We might ask about the values that shape their views. What are their biggest concerns or fears if people don't agree with them? What life experiences have influenced their beliefs or perspectives?

Without this effort to understand, people naturally tend to polarize, taking opposite sides of an issue. This happens with the parents of challenging children. One parent says we have to be tougher and the other one says we have to be more loving and understanding. Democrats focus on corporate greed as the primary problem and Republicans focus on government restrictions interfering with our freedom. In regard to Israel, one side may focus on the need to be

vigilant towards our enemies so we don't let down our guard and make ourselves more vulnerable. The other side may focus on needing to turn our enemies into friends so that we aren't caught in a never ending vicious cycle of violence.

What if it turns out there is some merit to both sides, but because we are so polarized we only see how extreme and unreasonable the other side seems.

When we make space to understand more deeply why another person feels and thinks so differently from us, interesting things can happen. It may help us get clearer about what led us to our own views. It may help us be less reactive to the people we disagree with and more open to finding a way to bridge our differences.

Constructive Conversations provides a structure and guidelines that enable us to have this conversation. Our program is based on a model of dialogue created by the Public Conversations Project (PCP). The elements of this model include meeting in small groups with a facilitator and agreement to guidelines that stress respect, listening, not trying to persuade each other or engage in debate, and giving participants equal time to talk. The dialogue begins with each person reflecting on questions provided by the facilitator, and then taking turns responding to that question. The questions invite

participants to share their own experience and to reflect on the values, concerns, and experience that have shaped their views. In this initial stage, participants just listen respectfully to each other, but don't respond. After listening to each other respond to the same questions, the dialogue is opened up for people to ask each other questions and to respond to what they have heard from each other.

The full dialogue process takes two hours. Today, during Kiddush, you will have the opportunity to get a taste of this process. There are tables set aside for people who wish to experience this and there will be handouts with the guidelines, directions, and questions, and there will be facilitators at each table. We will meet from 12:30 until 1:30. If you do want to try this, please join a table when we announce the time to begin. Once the process begins it is disruptive to have a new person join.

From 1:30 to 2:00, we will meet in the Katz meeting room with anyone who would like to give us feedback, ask questions, or talk with us about the program.

And in the next few months you are invited to participate in a fuller dialogue when we offer this program on two Sunday afternoons.

The goals of the Israel committee in providing this program are:

1. To enable all members to feel welcome regardless of their views about Israel.
2. To create an atmosphere in which people feel comfortable enough to share their views with each other without tense arguments resulting in feeling alienated.
3. To encourage acceptance and understanding of differences in our views about Israel.
4. To give people the skills to listen, to ask questions, and seek deeper understanding rather than try to persuade people to think differently.

When Judah spoke from his heart, it opened Joseph's heart. What a surprise to discover that this person I thought was a stranger is really my brother. I hope you will join us.