

## **A Call to Constructive Controversy**

*As differences devolve into uncivil acrimony, dignity is diminished and people holding diverse viewpoints cease listening to each other, it becomes more difficult if not impossible to find common ground.*

*We are experiencing a level of incivility, particularly over issues pertaining to Israel, that has not been witnessed in recent memory. Where such polarization occurs within the Jewish community, it tears at the fabric of Klal Yisrael – our very sense of peoplehood – and is a cause for profound concern.*

*Civility is neither the lack of difference nor the squelching of debate. It is the application of care for the dignity of every human being, even those with whom we may sharply disagree. It is listening carefully when others speak, not just to understand what they are saying and thinking, but to open ourselves to the possibility that they may have something to teach. It is the guarding of the tongue and the rejection of false witness.*

*As Jews, our shared past, present, and future require that we find ways to work for a common good, toward Klal Yisrael. Each of us has a sacred obligation to heal our broken world. This repair requires that we recognize that the divine is in every one of us.*

- Jewish Council on Public Affairs, Statement on Civility Adopted by 2010 Plenum

Jewish tradition is clear that conflict and controversy must be handled in a way that recognizes the dignity of each individual. *Machloket l'shem shamayim*, "argument for the sake of heaven," is intended to increase mutual understanding and strengthen community ties. As Rochester Jews committed to this powerful teaching, we feel called to speak out against the increasingly hostile and personal rhetoric tarnishing our conversation about Israel and Palestine. We believe such discourse is not only counter to our most valued ethical traditions, but actively harmful to relationships within our community.

For these reasons, we pledge to honor the wisdom of our heritage by adhering to the following actions based on fundamental Jewish values:

1. *All human beings are created in the divine image. (Genesis 1:27)*

We will treat others with the respect and dignity due to them as a fellow human being whose value is equal to our own, recalling Hillel's summary of the Torah: "What is hateful to you do not do to another (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a)."

2. *Even diametrically opposed viewpoints may reflect sacred truth. (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b)*

We will refrain from denigrating those with whom we disagree, understanding that while they may be our opponents, they are not our enemies.

In public statements, we will acknowledge the significant diversity of opinion that exists within the American Jewish community on issues related to Israel and Palestine and refrain from portraying one single perspective as representative of the whole.

3. *The purpose of our engagement is to unite, rather than fragment, our community. (Pirkei Avot 5:17)*

In making statements, creating educational programs, and speaking with others we will ask ourselves whether the impact of our words and actions will build connections across differences or serve to further polarize positions, upholding the former and refraining from the latter.

4. *Constructive controversy requires openness and respect. (Pirkei Avot 5:17; Eruvin 13b)*

We will enter into conversation with our opponents for the purpose of greater understanding and with a willingness to listen to their perspectives in the same way we wish them to listen to ours.

5. *Each human being is unique, with their own particular experience and understanding. (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38a)*

Unless we are acting as the elected or appointed representative of an organization, we will speak only for ourselves and about our own beliefs, perceptions, and experiences. We will not presume to know the intentions or assumptions of others or base our own ideas about someone on something we have not heard from them directly.

6. *We are strictly forbidden from publicly shaming another person (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 58b)*

If we feel the need to reprove an individual for their behavior we will do so privately and with humility and compassion, as our Jewish tradition teaches us.

7. *We are responsible for how our emotions impact our behavior towards others. (Leviticus 19:17-18)*

We will acknowledge and honor our emotional reactions, understanding that they may come from our shared history of trauma, while taking responsibility for how we manage and express those feelings with others. This includes taking care of our needs, so that we can bring our best selves to our social interactions.

8. *We are obliged to behave ethically even when others do not. (Pirkei Avot 2:5)*

These agreements are based on Jewish values which we believe are applicable regardless of the context. We will uphold them whether or not others agree or abide by them as well.

It is our sincere hope that following these guidelines will strengthen our community and repair our relationships with one another. We hope all those who share our desire to treat each member of our community with dignity, respect, and compassion will join us in agreeing to abide by them.

#### Sources cited:

Genesis 1:27

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

And God created humankind in the divine image,  
creating it in the image of God—  
creating them male and female.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

דַּעֲלֶךָ סְנִי לְחֻבְרֶךָ לֹא תַעֲבִיד — זוּ הִיא כֹּל הַתּוֹרָה כּוֹלָהּ, וְאִידֶךָ פִּירוּשָׁהּ הוּא, זִיל גְּמוֹר.  
That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study

Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b

יֵצְאָה בַּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה: אֵלוּ וְאֵלוּ דְּבָרֵי אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים הֵן  
A Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God.

Pirkei Avot 5:17

כָּל מַחֲלָקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. וְשֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. אִיזוּ  
הִיא מַחֲלָקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחֲלָקֶת הַלֵּל וְשַׁמַּי. וְשֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחֲלָקֶת קֶרַח  
וְכָל עֵדוּתוֹ:

Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure; But one that is not for the sake of Heaven, will not endure. Which is the controversy that is for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Hillel and Shammai. And which is the controversy that is not for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Korah and all his congregation

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38a

תְּנוּ רַבֵּנָן לְהַגִּיד גְּדוּלְתוֹ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא שָׂאֵם טוֹבַע כְּמָה מִטְּבֻעוֹת  
בְּחוֹתָם אֶחָד וְכוּלָן דּוּמִין זֶה לְזֶה אֲבָל הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא טוֹבַע כָּל אָדָם בְּחוֹתָמוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם  
'הִרְאִישׁוּן וְאִין אֶחָד מֵהֵן דּוּמָה לְחַבְרִירוֹ שֶׁנָּא

The Sages taught in a baraita (Tosefta 8:5): The fact that Adam the first human was created alone serves to declare the greatness of the supreme Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Blessed Holy One, as a person stamps several coins with one seal, and they are all similar to each other. But the Blessed Holy One stamps all people with the seal of Adam the first human, and not one of them is similar to another

Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 58b

א"ר יוחנן משום ר"ש בן יוחאי גדול אונאת דברים מאונאת ממון  
Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: The transgression of verbal abuse is worse than the transgression of monetary exploitation

כָּל הַמְּלַבֵּין פְּנֵי חֲבִירוֹ בְּרַבִּים כְּאִילוֹ שׁוֹפֵךְ דָּמִים  
Anyone who humiliates another in public, it is as though they were spilling blood.

Leviticus 19:17-18

לֹא־תִשְׂנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְּךָ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֶטְא:  
לֹא־תִקֵּם וְלֹא־תִטּוֹר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרַעְךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kin so that you incur no guilt on their account.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people so that you may love your fellow as yourself: I am יהוה.

Pirkei Avot 2:5

וּבְמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין אֲנָשִׁים, הִשְׁתַּדַּל לְהִיּוֹת אִישׁ:

Literally: In a place where there are no human beings, try to be a human being.

Meaning: If no one else is taking responsibility, take responsibility.