



Mindfulness in Constructive Conflict by Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels

How do we make conflict productive rather than destructive, how do we use our noticing of a problem as a way to create growth rather than enmity and how do we work with our anger to heal rather than destroy? The Torah commands us, “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am YHVH.” (Lev. 19:17-18). We are commanded to rebuke from love, not hate, to challenge without creating a situation of enmity and sin. Yet how do we do this?

For 9 Adar, the Jewish Day of Constructive Conflict, we at Or HaLev: A Center for Jewish Spirituality and Meditation, would like to offer some concrete techniques that help us respond wisely to our anger and make our conflicts productive rather than destructive. The technique we offer is one piece of teshuvah (literally return) our return to who we really are rather than being lost in anger and self-protection.

What do we do then when we feel anger, whether in the midst of conflict or prior to one? How do we prevent destructive conflict and create constructive conflict instead?

Step 1: Restraining Established Patterns

First, we attempt, through compassionate self-discipline, to not take either one of our standard escapes from anger which are 1. Acting out (lashing out, yelling, criticizing, blaming, passive aggression, etc.) 2. Avoidance (eating chocolate, watching TV, facebook, etc.) and 2. Repression (stuffing it in, repressing, tightening inside, etc.).

Step 2: Dropping the Story and Turning towards the Body

Second, we stop perseverating over the story which is the cause of our anger, whatever it may be, whether the slight at work, the political conflict, or the household disagreement. Then, we turn towards the actual feeling of anger in the body, the burning in the chest, the racing in the heart, the trembling in the body, however you feel it. In doing so, we stop reinforcing the anger and we bring our awareness to the actual feeling of the experience itself rather than the story around it.

Step 3: Welcoming and Softening

Having brought our awareness to the anger we then, with each inhalation, invite that sensation in and, with each exhalation, soften into the physical experience of the anger itself. When I say soften, I mean both that we soften physically around the site of tension and that we soften our mental and emotional resistance to the experience of anger itself. Our normal strategies, whether acting out, avoidance or repression, are, in one way or another, all attempts to avoid the actual discomfort of anger and feel some sense of safety and control. With this technique we give up the attempt to avoid the discomfort and seek control and instead rather try to be intimate with our actual experience. By courageously and compassionately welcoming the anger in we are no longer trapped in fear, resistance and avoidance. When we welcome and soften we begin to notice that we are no longer trapped by the anger, that the anger has space and possibility around it and we are no longer caught in the need to fight or flee.

Step 4: Sensing What is Underneath

Having created some space, equanimity and stability around the anger, we can then inquire, in a direct sensory way, into what is underneath the anger. Anger is always a secondary emotion. When we truly open to anger and welcome it in, we can become aware of the hurt, fear, confusion, vulnerability and other feelings underneath. We begin to see where we are holding, where we are tight, hurt and scared, and what false thoughts and stories may be generating some of that pain and fear. We may even see the roots of some of our responses in previous life experiences, our childhood, or ingrained patterns of response.

Step 5: Letting Go of Blame, Not Making it Personal

Compassionately opening to what is underneath the anger means we are no longer trapped in thought patterns of blame, anger, resentment and revenge. No longer caught in the anger and the thoughts surrounding it, we can have a more bird's eye view of the conflict which makes it less personal and less threatening. When we make it personal, we get stuck in sides and 'teams.' When we make it personal, we desperately defend ourselves even when we know we are wrong. Indeed, this is what the Piaseczner rebbe suggests is the potential danger of study, the way in which the self identifies with the position it is taking at the moment in an argument (Derekh HaMelekh p. 450). When we can drop the identification, we see, in a more balanced way the way in which someone else has acted harmfully and the ways that we have acted harmfully. In seeing our lack of wisdom, our own jealousy, desire for control, violence and confusion, we see that we, as well as our partner in conflict, are just fallible human beings, not evil. We create the possibility of letting go of the 'sides' and the interest in 'winning' and start trying our best to simply understand the conflict and the different needs involved. We start to become more interested in the 'best solution' rather than the solution I want.

Step 6: Vulnerability and Deep Listening

Having let go of the identification, we no longer have to protect ourselves so much. There is a possibility that we might stop defending ourselves and really listen to both the other person and to our own deep desires and fears. We are open and vulnerable, ready to be changed by this conflict, ready to see in a new way. We are ready to take responsibility for our own role in the conflict rather than putting all the responsibility and blame on the other person. Here is the place R. Nahman of

Bratslav describes, the way conflict (*makhloket*) can create a void, an empty space of possibility into which can flow the creative energy of new creation (Likutei Moharan 64). This is the place where conflict can be transformative because we are actually open to listening to the conflict rather than defending ourselves.

Step 7: Wise Communication

No longer defending ourselves, we can now communicate in a loving and respectful way. This communication will include the ways in which we feel hurt, scared, and disrespected etc. by the other's actions, but it will be said from the perspective of our own investigation of our experience rather than as a way of blaming the other person. Speaking in this way, engenders curiosity and interest in both ourselves and our partner in conflict. They can notice that we are no longer defending ourselves and are genuinely trying to communicate openly and truly to try to jointly come to the best resolution of this difficulty.

This technique can be used at any time, in preparation for a conflict, by yourself as a way to work with a present conflict for you, in the midst of a conflict by taking a time out and returning calmer and clearer, or to reflect upon a conflict and reengage in a healthier and wiser way.

It can help us to set our intention when we go into some context of conflict, an intention of love rather than hate, an intention of rebuke without resentment and loving engagement with our fellow.

After you practice this, you can share this with someone else to help give them tools to relate to their conflict more wisely.

Happy conflicts!

Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels
Founder and Spiritual Director
Or HaLev: A Center for Jewish Spirituality and Meditation
orhalev.org
heartconsciousness@gmail.com