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JCPA | JEWISH COUNCIL
FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

NEW YORK OFFICE
116 East 27th Street, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10016
(212) 684-6950

WASHINGTON OFFICE
1775 K Street NW, Suite 320
Washington, DC 20006
(202) 212-6036

Rabbi Melissa Weintraub • Rabbi Steve Gutow • Rabbi Amy Eilberg • Ethan Felson

Building *Machloket L'Shem Shamayim:*
Some Practical Guidelines for Synagogues, JCCs and other Institutions

Rabbi Melissa Weintraub and Dr. Eyal Rabinovitch

We often hear from people who want to open up conversation across political divides in their communities, but don't know how. Our short and generally unsatisfying answer is "it depends:" on the makeup of the community, the history of disagreement and difference on this topic, access to trained facilitators, the idiosyncrasies of each community. Rather than run through a laundry list of processes we've designed for communities or seen others design, we offer the following set of practical guidelines and strategies that drive virtually all of our work when we are building customized processes for different communities.

The Big Picture

Building *machloket l'shem shamayim* means strengthening our communal capacity to probe disagreements productively. *Machloket l'shem shamayim* is about much more than "agreeing to disagree" or seeking out common ground. It's about creating institutional infrastructure for speaking openly about charged topics, naming and exploring our differences honestly, and doing so without attacking, dismissing or caricaturing each other. It's about teaching our stakeholders and constituents to passionately pursue a thorough understanding of those who disagree with them in order to expand and clarify their own thinking and release learning, creativity, and fresh ideas.

The following practical guidelines and sample programs focus on building productive engagement within a community or institution around a charged social topic like Israel. Many of these guidelines, moreover, can be applied to interpersonal disagreements among Board members, staff, funders and other stakeholders.

These practical guidelines are designed to contribute to three objectives:

- create space for the conversations that people want to have but aren't having
- support participant confidence, stability, and active participation
- support participants to take risks, show vulnerability, and speak at the level of the moral instincts, experiences, and core values that generally drive analytical thinking

Core Practical Guidelines

1. Turn groupthink on its head

   - Bring together people across *some* degree of genuine social and/or political differences
   - Actively recruit those who have been too intimidated, avoidant, or frustrated to engage
   - Offer **communication skills training** and **skilled facilitators** to support participants to listen resiliently, challenge one another's assumptions, and speak to their differences while sustaining curiosity rather than reactivity in their interactions
   - Create an arc of programming for a group of stakeholders or constituents, rather than a one-off event

     Example: Community of Inquiry
     In a Community of Inquiry, a specific community of people – such as a congregation, professional team, leadership cohort, or alumni group – commits itself to a systematic, ongoing exploration of a given set of issues, going through a series of events and processes together over a sustained period of time. Ideally this includes some degree of cross-conflict communication training, extensive input (surveys, interviews), personal story-sharing, and study circles on topics of shared concern. A leadership cohort might focus on opening up confidential channels of conversation on an issue that have not yet been available in a community or institution.

     NOTE: crossing even small group-think boundaries is valuable; not every conversation needs to have *every* side or group present

2. Present substantive content in a way that is authentically multi-vocal

   - Offer multiple sources of information as well as ways of narrating and interpreting that information on critical issues
   - Support participant input and ownership over the process and content as much as possible
   - Integrate a redemptive – rather than caricatured or shaming -- depiction of the respective views held by people in the room into the presentation and/or content of the event. When people recognize themselves in program content – when they are mirrored *as they see themselves* – they are more open and capable of stretching themselves to take in new information and ideas.

3. Give channels for participant expression

   - Create avenues for people to express themselves, alongside or in lieu of frontal programs (e.g. participatory small group conversations rather than just Q and A following lectures, films, or panels)

     Example: Open space
     Open space is a large-group modality that turns conventional conference formats on its head, allowing maximal participant input. Participants spontaneously select multiple topics for conversation and self-

organize into smaller groups in which people are invited to speak about whichever topic they find most appealing. Originally designed to work without facilitators, it is best done with skilled facilitators on charged issues. Among existing innovative modalities of large-group facilitation (World Café, AmericaSpeaks, etc.), we have found Open Space to be particularly useful for convening communal cross-conflict conversations.

4. Go toward the heat, not away from it:

- Ensure that content and conversation do not avoid the most complicated or contentious issues
- Do not push the conversation toward consensus, "common ground," or "what unites us;" while it can be helpful to name points of commonality, focusing on those points often comes across to participants as avoidance of the "real" issues
- Work toward "safe enough" space. While it's important to create a "safe space" where people are comfortable enough to share what's on their minds, genuine deliberation across differences requires risk and vulnerability. A space can become "too safe" when people don't touch the things that divide them or remain in their comfort zones.

5. Value the personal

- Support people to share and listen to each other's stories, accounts, questions, and knowledge; elevate their direct experience to a form of "expertise"

  Example: Life Maps
  People articulating and listening to moments of importance to each other as individuals brings out the emotional power and human complexity that are often obfuscated in charged conversations. Focusing on personal experience is also equalizing, given that many experience "not knowing enough" as a barrier to entry on polarized issues. There are many ways to craft storytelling and story-sharing events and to integrate these processes into other gatherings. A description of one of these formats, called "life mapping," is available at http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org/civility/index.php/resources/.

6. Help the community attain an accurate picture of itself

- Undo the distortions of the community's public space by creating a snapshot of people's diverse views, questions, hopes, and concerns (i.e., through surveys or interviews)

7. Help the community articulate an aspirational vision and values statement for the community they want to be on this issue

While not every process, gathering, event, or interaction will realize all of these guidelines, each of these strategies helps undo destructive patterns of social conflict and pro-actively build communal infrastructure for *machloket l'shem shamayim.*