



Jewish Day of  
Constructive Conflict  
[WWW.9ADAR.ORG](http://WWW.9ADAR.ORG)



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

## Restoring *Machloket L'Shem Shamayim* in Jewish Life: If Not Now, When?

*By Rabbi Steve Gutow, JCPA President and CEO and Ethan Felson, JCPA Vice-President and General Counsel*

A running story in the Jewish drama, from the destruction of the Second Temple up through modern times, has been that divisions among us pose an existential threat to Jewish security and wellbeing. Almost 70 years ago, the American Jewish community united to form what is now the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) so that we may come together as a community, to study issues, learn from one another and - where possible - shape consensus and act in our collective interest.

In recent times, many of us have felt that what divides us is starting to eclipse what unites us. Difference, itself, is good. A robust debate and a frank and civil exchange of ideas helps to inform and yield solutions to vexing problems. As differences devolve into uncivil acrimony though, dignity is diminished and people holding diverse viewpoints cease listening to each other. Conflict escalates. Consensus evaporates. Solutions move further into the horizon.

Several years ago, the Jewish community and the American political world seemed to be catching on fire. Anger was everywhere and conversation was at a standstill. It seemed that across our community - Democrats and Republicans, hawks and doves, liberals and conservatives - no one could speak to each other as if the other person was a human being. Faced with this disastrous open pit of anger, the JCPA began a process of study, deliberation and action.

First, we examined the Israel conversation within the Jewish community. We discussed how to promote passionate and holy debate. We asked what the "rules" are, if any. We looked at what strategies might take us forward. We delved into the underlying teachings and challenged ourselves as to how we can use *tochecha*, so that when we engage with those with whom we differ, we do it in a way that is productive and holy. And we probed how we can train others to join in these pursuits.

We brought together some of the best minds in Jewish life to discuss how to move the ball forward including Joseph Telushkin, Blu Greenberg, Melissa Weintraub, Abe Foxman, Doug Kahn, Noam Neusner, and Amy Eilberg. A [televised conversation](#) helped to engage others.

Then, we came together at our annual Plenum where our 125 local Jewish Community Relations Councils and 14 national agencies unanimously resolved that the decline in civility in our community and broader society is a matter of urgent priority. We issued a call for civility and launched a campaign to convene,

**REPAIRING THE WORLD THROUGH JEWISH ACTIVISM**

inspire, and empower Jewish community institutions and their leaders to restore, engage in, and model civil discourse. Our call to repair our broken world demanded nothing less than our full attention and very best efforts.

Next, we started finding community solutions. We started with some low hanging fruit. We created a [civility statement](#) to frame the issue and set goals for communal discourse. More than 800 Jewish leaders representing the farthest reaches of differing points of view signed. We brought together 17 JCRC leaders for an intensive three-day workshop that included text study, issue examination and role playing to help these leaders deepen skills and return to their communities better able to teach and reflect the principles of holy and passionate debate. We have visited dozens of communities, some to help defuse conflict, others to proactively teach the underlying principles that help sustain civil discourse. We have developed a clearinghouse on civility and we have shared Jewish texts, sermons and essays with rabbis across the country for high holidays.

Now, we have started moving higher up the tree. What are the ways we can reach powerfully and honestly into communities to transform discourse? What skills to Jewish leaders need to help them reach across conflict, to foster productive debate without silencing dissent, to help open up ears and minds. With the staff direction of Rabbi Melissa Weintraub, and the lay leadership of Rabbi Amy Eilberg we are offering a rich cafeteria option of resources to communities to get to the heart of the matter.

This year, with a generous grant from the New York federation, we have selected a diverse cohort of twenty-three Fellows to serve as facilitators and conveners in a year-long program called "Resetting the Table" Conceived and directed by Eyal Rabinovitch, the program is training these rising leaders to facilitate conversations and design programs around Israel in spaces currently marked by avoidance, intimidation, or tension. We hope in coming years to bring this program or one like it to your community.

We have also proudly joined the Pardes Center for Judaism and Conflict Resolution and we enthusiastically are participating in and promoting the international Jewish Day of Constructive Conflict (machloket l'shem shamayim), dedicated to both the study and practice of Judaism and conflict resolution.

In sum, we have established a central address for civil engagement. We have a website [www.jewishpublicaffairs.org/civility](http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org/civility) that will allow us to continue gathering the American Jewish community under the spirited but loving aura of Hillel and Shammai. Take a look -- join us in our dreams. The future can go in either direction. We can remain a community that cannot sustain our communal bonds through disagreement or we can become a community that models Hillel and Shammai's "heavenly disputes" for all peoples.