

## **Models of Pluralism- text study and small group work**

This activity has two goals: 1) to provide the participants with various models of pluralism and to help them explore these models by studying Jewish texts, and 2) to continue processing their experiences of pluralism and peoplehood in light of the models.

*Timing: 30 mins*

*In this section the group is split into sub-groups of no more than five participants.*

Each small group is given a study text and a set of instructions. If necessary, the same text can be given to more than one group. During the small-group activity, staff members should circulate among the groups, answering questions, helping them with the text study and stimulating discussion.

### **Instructions**

1. Below is a story about Jewish conflict-resolution and coexistence. Read the story out loud in your group, stopping every so often to make sure everyone understands what's happening.
2. Discuss the story using the questions below.
3. If you had to give a name to the model of conflict resolution and coexistence illustrated by the story, what would it be?
4. Which of your *day to day* experiences reflect events or processes that fit into this model, or that could be dealt with using this model?
5. How would the Jewish people look if this model were to dominate? Would the value of "Klal Israel" be strengthened or weakened by it?

## **1) THE STORIES**



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After the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, the Jewish community in the Land of Israel retained a degree of autonomy and was governed according to Jewish law. The experts on Jewish law were the Rabbis (otherwise known as sages or wise men) who invested all their energies in learned discussions in an attempt to arrive at the correct interpretations of the law. The story below recounts one of these discussions, a debate between Rabbi Eliezer, who interprets the law in one way, and the rest of the Rabbis who disagree with him.

On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forth every imaginable argument, but the Rabbis did not accept any of them. Finally he said to them, “if the Law agrees with me, let the carob tree prove it!” Sure enough, the carob tree uprooted itself and moved one hundred feet. “No proof can be brought from a carob tree,” they retorted.

Again he said to them, “if the Law agrees with me, let the stream prove it!” Sure enough, the stream flowed backward. “No proof can be brought from a stream,” they retorted....

Again Rabbi Eliezer said to the sages, “if the Law agrees with me, let it be proved from heaven!” Sure enough, a divine voice cried out, “why do you dispute Rabbi Eliezer, with whom the Law always agrees?”

But Rabbi Joshua stood up and protested, “It [the Torah] is not in heaven! We pay no attention to divine voices, because long ago, at Mount Sinai, You wrote in the Torah, ‘make your decisions according to the majority.’”

Rabbi Nathan met the prophet Elijah and asked him, “What did the Holy One do at that moment?” Elijah: “He laughed, saying, ‘My sons have defeated me, my sons have defeated me.’”

***Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b***

### **Discussion questions:**

- \* The rabbis are engaged in a debate about what may and may not be done in a Jewish community. We won't go into the details of the issue at stake. Rather, what *kind of arguments* does each side bring? What *proofs* do they use?
- \* Why does Rabbi Eliezer feel he has the right to decide?
- \* Why do the others feel he is wrong?
- \* How is the debate ultimately resolved?
- \* Does the text present this resolution in a positive or negative light?
- \* How do you feel about this way of resolving conflicts? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

Today, if we want to know on what day a particular holiday falls, we look at a calendar that is worked out years in advance. Until about 1500 years ago, this was not the case. Rather, around the beginning of each month, people would search the sky for the new moon. The sighting of the moon signified the start of the new month (the Jewish calendar is a lunar one). When the new moon was sighted, the witnesses would pass on the news to the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Court), which had the exclusive power to regulate the calendar. If the sighting



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was reliable, Rabban Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin, declared that day to be the first of the month. From this point, the dates of all the holidays could be reliably calculated (for example, if today were the 1<sup>st</sup> of Tishri, you would know that Yom Kippur – 10<sup>th</sup> Tishri – must fall in nine days time).

On one occasion, two witnesses came and said, “We saw the new moon at its proper time,” but on the night that should have been a New Moon it was not visible. However, by that time Rabban Gamliel had accepted the witnesses’ testimony, and had already declared the New Moon. Rabbi Dosa ben Horkinas said, “They are false witnesses.” Rabbi Joshua said to Rabbi Dosa, “I agree with what you say.”

Then Rabban Gamliel sent word to Rabbi Joshua: “I order you to come to me with your staff and your money on the day that according to your reckoning should be Yom Kippur.”

Rabbi Joshua went to Rabbi Dosa ben Horkinas, who said to him, “If we call in question the decisions of the court of Rabban Gamliel, we may well question the decisions of each and every court that has arisen since the days of Moses until now.”

Hearing that, Rabbi Joshua took his staff and his money, and went to Yavneh to Rabban Gamliel on the day on which, according to his reckoning, Yom Kippur fell.

As soon as Rabban Gamliel saw him, he rose up from his chair, kissed Rabbi Joshua on his head, and said to him, “Come in peace my master and my disciple – my master in wisdom and my disciple because you adopted my decision. Blessed is the generation in which men of great distinction obey those of little distinction.”

*Mishnah Rosh HaShanah*

### **Discussion questions**

- \* What is the bone of contention between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Joshua, one of the most respected sages of the generation?
- \* What does Rabban Gamliel hope to prove when he orders Rabbi Joshua to appear before him? (According to Jewish law, it is forbidden to carry a staff or money on Yom Kippur).
- \* Why does Rabbi Dosa advise Rabbi Joshua to obey? What principle is he trying to defend?
- \* What would have been the implications if Rabbi Joshua had refused to obey?
- \* How would you describe Rabban Gamliel’s method of winning the argument?
- \* How do you feel about this way of resolving conflicts? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

\* \* \*

Aaron was Moses’ brother. He was known as a “people person”, tending to the needs of the people of Israel during the Exodus from Egypt, in contrast to Moses whose primary responsibility was receiving God’s revelation and communicating it to the people. Hillel was a rabbi in the period of the Second Temple (first century BCE), known for his tolerance and his lenient attitude to Jewish observance.

Hillel said: Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving human beings and bringing them near to Torah.



Loving peace. What does this mean? It means that a man should love to foster peace in Israel between human beings, just as Aaron loved to foster peace in Israel between human beings....

When two men had quarreled with each other, Aaron would go and sit with one of them and say, "My son, see what your companion is doing! He beats his breast and rends his clothes as he moans, 'Woe is me! How can I lift my eyes and look my companion in the face? I am shamed before him, since it is I who offended him.'" Aaron would sit with him until he had removed all rancor from his heart.

Then Aaron would go and sit with the other man and say likewise, "My son, see what your companion is doing! He beats his breast and rends his clothes as he moans, 'Woe is me! How can I lift my eyes and look my companion in the face? I am shamed before him, since it is I who offended him.'" Aaron would sit with him until he had removed all rancor from his heart.

Later, when the two met, they would embrace and kiss each other.

*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*

**Discussion questions**

- \* What was effective about Aaron's way of fostering peace?
- \* In what ways is his method problematic?
- \* How does Aaron's method help resolve the conflict (the issue at stake) between the two men? Or does he avoid resolving it?
- \* How do the parties feel (in themselves and about each other) after Aaron's intervention?
- \* How would a community look if this method of conflict resolution dominated?
- \* "Peace" is the dominant value in this text. What important values in conflict resolution are neglected?
- \* How do you feel about Aaron's way of fostering peace?

\* \* \*



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The school of Shammai and the school of Hillel were opposing schools of Jewish study and law in the time of the Second Temple (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) and thereafter.

Although the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel were in disagreement – what one forbade the other permitted – nevertheless, the school of Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from the families of the school of Hillel, nor did the school of Hillel refrain from marrying those of the school of Shammai. This should teach you that they showed love and friendship toward one another, thus putting into practice the injunction “Love ye truth, but also peace.”

**Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 14b**

### **Discussion questions**

- \* What were the Schools of Hillel and Shammai in disagreement over?
- \* Was the disagreement between them general or specific?
- \* What is significant about the fact that the two schools were prepared to marry with each other? What can we learn about the relations between them and their feelings about each other?
- \* What basis is there for coexistence apart from agreement over certain issues?
- \* Is it actually possible to “love truth and also peace”? Are there times when one of these values becomes more important than the other?
- \* How did the two schools resolve the disagreements between them? Or, if they didn't resolve the issues, what impact did this have on their relationship?
- \* What advantages and disadvantages are there to this approach of “agreeing to disagree”? How do you feel about this method of coping with conflict?

\* \* \*

## **2) Group presentation and discussion**

***The goal of this section is to discuss and evaluate the various models of pluralism, assessing their relevance and implications for the Jewish people. The section enables the participants to learn from each other and helps them pull together the loose ends of the learning process so far.***

*Timing: 30 minutes*

*This section should be run with the entire group in one room.*

The small groups return to the main group and sit in a circle. Each sub-group briefly presents the story it studied, the model the story represents, some of the *day to day* experiences that fit into the model, and how they feel about the model.

The facilitator now leads a discussion, focussing on the following points:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each model?



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- How would Israel look if a given model of pluralism were to be adopted?
- Which is the ideal model (if there is one?) How should Israelis settle their differences and coexist with each other?
- Which is the ideal model for your Jewish community?
- How does the reality of your community match up to this ideal?
- What can your community/you learn from how Israel deals with the issue of conflict and co-existence?
- What do you/your community have to teach Israel in this area?

### **3) Conclusion**

The facilitator wraps up the discussion, and invites each participant to think of a closing statement to sum up their feelings about pluralism and peoplehood. The statement can be a word, a sentence or a question, and can relate to:

- An experience they've had
- A lesson they've learnt
- An insight they've gained
- A feeling they've felt

Each participant shares their concluding statement with the group.



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