

What we're doing: instigated questions and provoked answers.

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A newsletter.



Dear Friends and Colleagues:

It's been a tough few weeks. As a patriotic citizen of these United States, I am outraged and genuinely frightened by the policies emerging daily from the new Administration: [Millions of my fellow Americans are at risk of losing their health care. Refugees who look to America as a beacon of hope and protection--as my ancestors, both Jewish and Norwegian, once did--will be turned away. Women around the world will lose access to comprehensive health care. The news media, whose sacred role as the Fourth Estate is a critical pillar of our democracy, is under assault.](#) And despite a total lack of evidence of voter fraud, [the Administration seems to be pursuing a wide-ranging investigation](#) whose outcomes may very well include voter ID laws that lead to the disenfranchisement of American citizens in a way that harkens back to Jim Crow.

Like many of you, and surrounded by hundreds of other Jews, I stood proudly with my wife and daughters last month at the Women's March on Washington, raising my voice and declaring my commitment to women's equality, access to reproductive health care, and LGBT rights, among other causes that my Jewish commitment to the pursuit of justice and the protection of the most vulnerable demands.



The potent cocktail of astonishment, outrage, and fear makes it easier for me to distance myself from and find fault in those with whom I disagree. The Jewish sensibility of *tochechah* juices my righteous / self-righteous dismay. In Vayikra 19:17, we read:

לֹא־תִשְׁנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חָטָא:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely rebuke your friend, and not bear sin because of him.

I've always struggled to understand the connection among the three clauses in this *pasuk*, but lately, I've been thinking the upshot is:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart;

You can't get away with just being angry when someone does something with which you disagree.

You shall surely rebuke your friend,

You need to take a stand to oppose it.

And not bear sin because of him. Otherwise, you're complicit in it.

And yet.

What if *tochechah* offers a too-easy excuse for a throw-away insult or rash judgment, for distance from those I love yet with whom I may disagree. I neither want my decency and empathy to be casualties of this political moment, nor am I confident that we can build and sustain a movement of resistance on *tochechah* alone.

What wisdom do I draw from the radical empathy of Gandhi, Mandela, King, the [Palestinian-Israeli Bereaved Families for Peace](#), and the survivors of the Charleston church shooting, whose offering of grace reverberated around the world? Inspired by their examples, I am endeavoring also to call upon a different Jewish sensibility, that of *makhloket l'shem shamayim* / disagreement for the sake of Heaven--the notion that, **while we may fight with one another over the things we believe to be right and true, we must never lose sight of one another's humanity** and that no one among us has a monopoly on truth or good.

In her excellent essay in the [January 2017 edition of Shma Now](#), Rabbi Melissa Weintraub writes:

Resisting engagement with red and purple counterparts is understandable. Yet many of the arguments against pursuing understanding rely on false binaries and strawmen. As if we must choose: Fight or dialogue, agitate or heal, condemn or introspect, rally the base or reach out to the other. As if noticing neglect for the grievances of the rural heartland obliges us to obscure the suffering of immigrants, African-Americans, the LGBTQ+ community, Muslims, and the urban poor.

Our tradition teaches that even when Hillel and Shammai fought tooth and nail over matters of substance, “Beit Hillel did not refrain from marrying the children of Beit Shammai, and Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying the children of Beit Hillel.” (BT Yevamot 14a) **They didn't sacrifice their capacity for empathy on the altar of their debates**, and they insisted on preserving their appreciation for one another's humanity in the face of profound disagreement.

As Rabbi Josh Feigelson wrote in [his post-election Ask Big Questions blog post](#):

[T]he activists of the 1950s and 60s were committed to governing first and foremost themselves—not

others; and . . . they were committed to developing political bonds with strangers, including those who sought to do them harm (as most famously and tragically epitomized in activist Michael Schwerner's last words to the Klansman who killed him during Freedom Summer: "Sir, I know just how you feel").

Serendipitously, this moment coincides with [9adar.org's Jewish Week of Constructive Conflict](http://9adar.org), a project of the Pardes Center for Judaism and Conflict Resolution, which will take place February 19-25, coinciding with the 9th of Adar, the commemoration of the moment, 2,000 years ago, when the commitment to civil discourse between Hillel and Shammai broke down and the great experiment of Second Temple Judaism began to unravel.

The great American experiment has always relied on *makhloket l'shem shamayim*, vigorous and committed debate bounded by an appreciation of our shared citizenship. Abraham Lincoln called it the swelling chorus of citizens touched by "the better angels of our nature" reminding us that we "are not enemies, but friends." When it feels like our core values as human beings are on the line, seeing in each other that shared humanity, let alone a shared vision for the future of this country, can feel like a luxury, if not downright impossible. I certainly struggle with this (just ask my father).

But what if it is the only way forward? How do we take strength from Jewish tradition and the better angels of patriotic dissent to embody *makhloket l'shem shamayim*? What practices of mindfulness, of curiosity and genuine inquiry, of searching out alternative viewpoints and of sharing--with honesty and vulnerability--the imperfect texts of our own stories, will we need to draw on? We're only at the beginning of what will likely be many, many weeks of conflict; I would so appreciate hearing from you your own balancing acts of *tochechah* and *makhloket l'shem shamayim*, activism and grace, radical empathy and action.

B'vracha,
Aaron





The current issue of [Sh'ma Now](#), on [The Forward](#) website, explores Machlochet I'Shem Shamayim, disagreement for the sake of heaven.

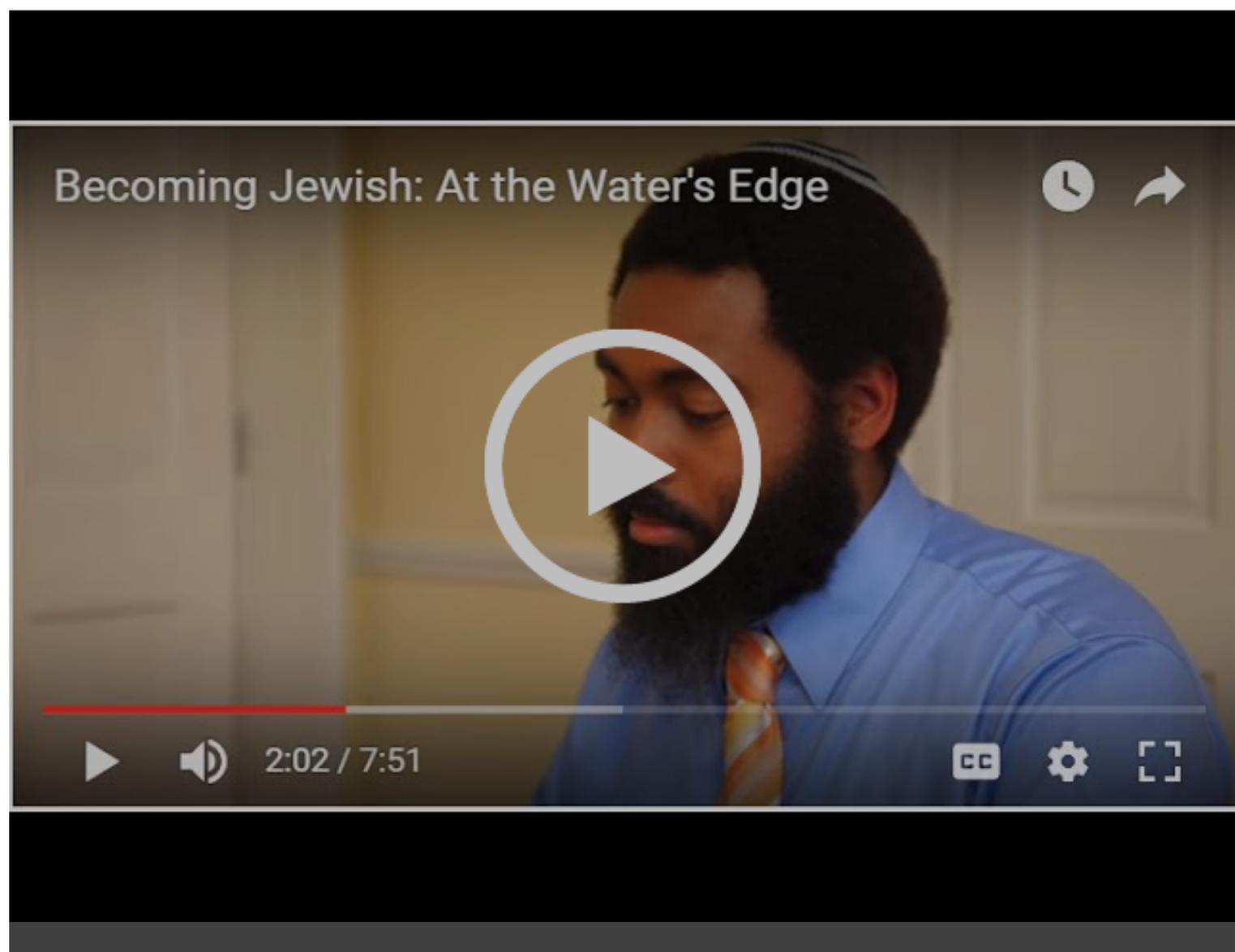
GIVING

We do our best to be transparent about our philanthropic strategies, which reflect our evolving theory of change. Grants, particularly multi-year commitments, are naturally a lagging indicator – they reflect the strategy at the time we made the grant rather than where we intend to invest in the future. As a foundation, we're about to undertake a more concerted effort to plan how we learn from our grants, a subject we're sure to address here often.

And in that spirit, I want to reflect for a minute on call I had with one of our grantees that reflects that spirit of learning *in medias res*. [Mayyim Hayyim](#) is a little more than halfway through a two-year grant to document and distribute two curricula: [Beyond the Huppah](#) (for newly married couples to explore how Jewish values can help guide decisions and provide a space for important conversations about finances, their relationship, and other topics that play a role in nearly every couple's life together) and **Now What?** (for people who recently converted to Judaism to explore how they'll integrate Judaism into their lives). In the process of developing "Beyond the Huppah," Mayyim Hayyim spent a lot of time thinking not only about each couple's relationship but also how weddings are a lifecycle moment in which couples are

eager to connect with other couples.

So many Jews struggle with how they fit into the community and how Judaism fits in their lives, even more so post-conversion where there have been so many supports and the process of being a part of a community is, just that, a process. The "Now What?" curriculum is currently under development and Mayyim Hayyim is learning a lot about how to translate a course that has a highly skilled facilitator who tailors conversation to the needs of participants into a rich experience that can be translated by other facilitators. Plus, since conversions usually happen under movement auspices, the "Now What?" course is many participants' first interaction with Jewish pluralism, which creates a rich and complex environment for exploration. Look for "Now What?" likely later this year, and in the meantime check out the beautiful video below about the course and Mayyim Hayyim's work in this area.



LEARNING

In their book, *The Jew Within*, Steve Cohen and Arnie Eisen introduced us to the "sovereign self," Jews who claim for themselves the authority to determine how they

will express their Jewishness. In the years since that book was published, the idea that individual Jews will choose if, when, and how they will be Jewish has become a “given” in the analysis of contemporary Jewish life. Millennials in particular are seen as “me”-oriented, embracing idiosyncratic versions of Jewishness and shunning conventional institutions where Jews have historically come together.

In focusing on the prominence of personal autonomy and individualized expressions of Jewishness, it’s possible, however, to lose sight of another phenomenon that is part of the contemporary Jewish landscape: Jews coming together to form grassroots communities for a wide variety of purposes. The applicants for the [Lippman Kanfer Prize for Applied Jewish Wisdom](#) – more than 200 in all – include dozens of locally based, independent entities that represent vehicles through which individuals are joining together to express their Jewishness in ways that are highly relevant personally, but also bespeak a desire to do so as part of a community. Some of these grassroots communities have already grown substantially and achieved institutional prominence, e.g., [Lab/Shul](#) in New York, [Sixth and I](#) in Washington, [Mishkan](#) in Chicago, [The Kitchen](#) in San Francisco, [Mayyim Hayyim](#) in Boston, and [Judaism Your Way](#) in Denver. But, many others are little known outside their immediate environs.

A few examples: [Carolina Jews for Justice](#) operates across the state combining advocacy, education, and coalition building to provide a Jewish voice on public policy issues. In three years it has built up a mailing list of nearly a thousand individuals. In Atlanta, a group of parents came together to create [In the City Camp](#), a day camp serving more than 400 children with an intentional, culturally Jewish experience that produces many of the same character-building results as an overnight camp. [Kol Hai: Hudson Valley Jewish Renewal](#) (New York) has created a multi-generational Shabbat community that appeals to and connects everyone from children to senior adults. In the spirit of Isaiah 58, [Fast for Feast](#), based in Denver/Boulder, partners with college students to revive the practice of donating the money saved by fasting on Yom Kippur to provide food for the needy. In Los Angeles, [Netiya](#) has created [Just Food and Gardens](#), a program that provides microgrants and educational programming to LA’s faith sector (including, but not limited to synagogues) to convert a portion of congregations’ land into gardens growing fresh produce for the local community. Brooklyn’s [Ways of Peace](#) sponsors [Sacred Undertaking](#), which provides unique resources, tools and training to reclaim the Jewish burial fellowship (hevra kadisha) as a supportive, participatory approach to spirituality, social justice and environmental sustainability at the end of life. In Philadelphia, [Jews in ALL Hues](#) (JIAH) empowers Jewish institutions and Jewish leaders to create a welcoming Jewish future for multi-heritage Jews (one Jewish parent, adopted Jews, Jews by choice, Jews of color and those who do not fit the ‘box’) through training and consultations, and gives multi-heritage Jews the tools to be leaders and change agents within their Jewish communities. And in Maine, the [Center for Small Town](#)

[Jewish Life](#) sponsors the annual [Maine Conference for Jewish Life](#), bringing together people from across the state for several days of learning, worship, and sharing of ideas, and the [Mid-Maine Hebrew Funtensive](#), a summer camp program run for \$5 a day.

What we learn from these examples is that Jews today indeed seek to fulfill diverse passions and purposes in expressing their Jewishness, but that **they also are prepared, and often eager, to come together with other Jews** to pursue these. **The pull of community remains strong, even in the era of the “sovereign self.”** And, the readiness of Jews to strike out in new directions to create a diverse array of purposive communities alongside our traditional institutions should be a source of reassurance to those who fear for the Jewish future.

SHARING

We are big fans of the [9AdarProject](#), The Jewish Week of Constructive Conflict, which will be taking place this year February 19-25. Arm yourself with thousands of years of wisdom on ways to argue without abandoning your values and identity.

Conflict Happens. Make It Better. [Get involved](#), access [resources](#), [take action](#) in your own community.

[JLens Network](#) is still looking for your opinions and perspectives on how to apply Jewish wisdom to the field of responsible/impact investing. [Take their survey here.](#)

[JTeach.org](#) has some [exceptional resources](#) for using Jewish wisdom to frame discussion of current events. In their most recent email, source sheets and lessons tackle: [to protest or not to protest?](#) [Am I my brother's keeper?](#)

We talk a lot about Torah and Living Torah - CoffeeShopRabbi has a great primer on [what we mean when we say Torah.](#)

Thinking like a Futurist, as [discussed here](#), seems to be as inherent to Jewish Sensibility as it is countercultural in the moment.

And speaking of Sensibilities, how about *Nahamu*, drawn from Isaiah 40, [the passage that inspired Martin Luther King Jr's I Have a Dream](#) speech.

Mussar. We have seen this rich sector of Jewish wisdom applied as important self-care, and as inspiration for others to take action. Learn more about this field of study in [this article from Hadassah Magazine](#), which features the work of [the Mussar Institute](#). Try one of [their free webinars for 2017](#), and dive into Pirkei Avot - wherever

in the world you are.

What else should we be sharing?

[Click here to send us your recommendations!](#)



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