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Ground Rules for Jewish Dialogue

Just as people's faces differ from each other, say the Sages of the Mishnah, so do their opinions differ. It is probably because of this assertive intellectual independence of individuals that the Sages so praised shalom, family and communal peace. Were peace not so difficult to attain, it would not be regarded as so precious a prize.

Few observers of the current Jewish scene would disagree with the conclusion that this fine balance between thinking for yourself and consideration for the views of others has been violently disrupted in our days. Whether in the larger Jewish community or, especially, in the Orthodox community itself--where there is really so much common ground on fundamental principles--the attempt to maintain communal peace amongst sincere advocates of diverse views--has all but broken down.

It is, of course, not the first time in Jewish history that this has happened (indeed, it seems more the rule than the exception), but we dare not console ourselves with this awareness that our tzorres are not novel. History should challenge and inspire us, not lull us into dangerous smugness. There is so much anger, ugliness, and incivility in our polemics--in fact, in some circles the very idea of

dialogue, even amongst observant Jews, has come into disrepute--that our viability as a community is imperiled.

I recommend most heartily, therefore, some ground rules for our internal Jewish dialogue as laid down in a little known volume. Meshiyat Nefesh (Warsaw, 1900) is a plagiarism of Vikucha Rabbah, which is, in turn, plagiarized from Matzref Ha-avodah, which is itself a pseudepigraphic work (that is, contrived by the author and attributed to a fictitious person) defending Hasidism from the Mitnagdic assaults in the early 19th century. With this pedigree, what of value can be expected from it? Much, but especially the author's four rules for peaceful and fruitful dialogue.

The first rule is: **There must be no hatred.** Hatred, says our anonymous author, inclines the mind in the wrong direction. It misleads the hater. If you violate lo tisna, the sin of hating a fellow Jew, your words do not deserve to be heard in any discussion. I would add an ancillary emotion, almost as negative as hatred: bittul, the contemptuous dismissal of an adversary as worthless and inferior. Is bittul ben Torah much less sinful than bittul Torah itself?

Second: **Remove all anger from your heart.** Anger causes you to stray from the path of truth as it clouds the mind, even when you tell yourself that your anger is really righteous indignation... Mutual scorn is beneath contempt.

Jews especially are an opinionated people who like to think for themselves. That is something to be proud of--but not if it leads to bitterness and mutual contempt and recrimination.

It is time for us to learn from history--not to mute our views, not to subjugate our minds to someone else's authority, but to avoid the four impediments to dialogue and, even better, to recast them in positive terms:

There must be love.

There must be respect.

There must be humility.

There must be integrity.

I hope that contributors to this column will exemplify these aspirations and, perhaps, will thereby contribute to intelligent and respectful dialogue within our community.

This is a tall order, but with these ground rules we may yet learn to disagree agreeably, le'shem shamayim, for the sake of Heaven.

The third rule is: **No self-aggrandizement.** The moment you look upon a debate as a way to display your own talents and virtue, you are prepared to dissemble in order to project your restless ego, and thus you lose all moral right to speak objectively. Seeking gedulah for oneself is a way to reduce the dialogue to sham and pettiness.

Finally, says our author, **Don't aim to win.** The love of triumph in a dialogue shows that you are not really engaged in a mutual search for truth--which is what real dialogue is all about. Winning debater's points can earn you a pat on the back from those who are mindless and unthinking, but it contributes nothing to genuine clarification of the issues. The rhetoric of triumphalism is the death-knell of dialogue and a sure way to kill peace. Real talmidei chakhamim increase shalom, as the Rabbis taught; those who undermine peace reveal thereby that they are not genuine scholars, only learned impostors.

These four points were recommended as steps in the reconciliation of the two opposing groups, the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim. How ironic that this threatened split was avoided, and the adversaries learned to live together peacefully and even respectfully--until our own days, when the same division reappears in ominous fashion. As if we didn't have enough new divisions and controversies!