

Eat, Pray, Socialize? On Civility, Hospitality, and Morality  
Dr. Shaina Trapedo

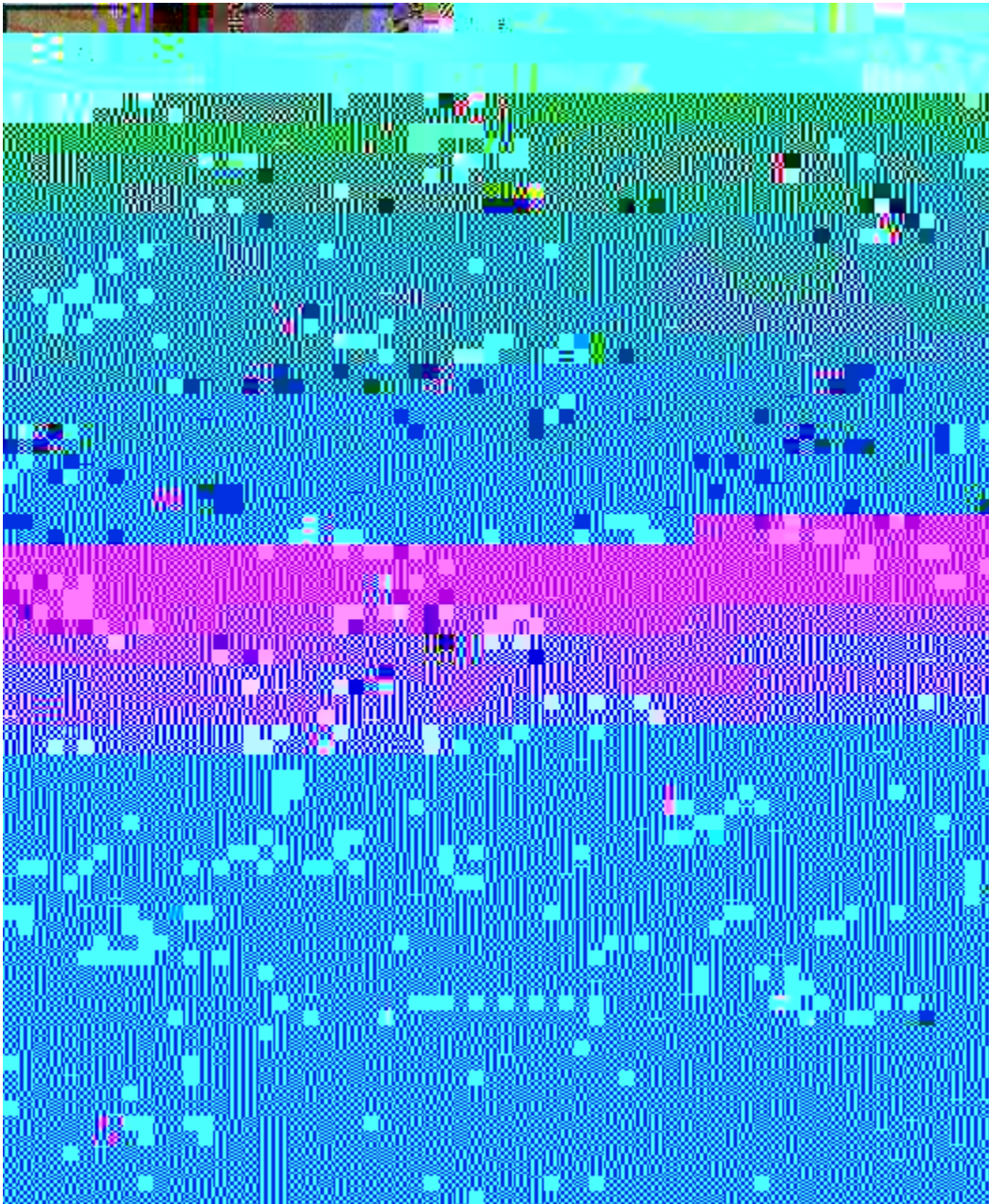
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Opening Question:

Based on personal experience, how would you describe the obligations/expectations of hosts and guests? What kinds of vulnerability are involved in being a host/guest?

Consider the following scenes of hospitality...

1. *Daniel 1:1-21*



"Daniel refusing the King's Food," Otto Adolph Stemler, early 1900s



days.

2. *Esther 1:1-9*

Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus— this is Ahasuerus who reigned, from India to Ethiopia, over a hundred and seven and twenty provinces—

that in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of

"Very uncomfortable for the Dormouse," thought Alice; "only, as it's asleep, I suppose it doesn't mind."

The table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one corner of it: "No room! No room!" they cried out when they saw Alice coming. "There's plenty of room!" said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table.

"Have some wine," the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.

Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. "I don't see any wine," she remarked.

How is choice or personal freedom represented by the authors in these scenes between characters of different background/cultures? Positively or negatively? Does personal freedom of the individual help/hinder a civil encounter with the Other?

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### On Civility and Hospitality

1. Rav Kook, adapted from *Ein Ayah* vol. I on Berachot 34b (5:124), printed in [\*Silver from the Land of Israel\*](#)

Over the millennia, Jews have faced the holy city of Jerusalem when praying. The Talmud in Berachot 34b



East, much as had Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt, in retaliation for his peace deal with Israel in 1979. War often turns ordinary people into heroes, while the pursuit of peace can make genuine heroes look like traitors to their own more nationalistic countrymen.

Half an hour into the flight, Paddy Ashdown turned to John Major and said, "John, here we are, leaders of three opposed parties, but we probably have more in common with one another than we do with the extremists in our own parties. We've never sat together before like this. Let's talk honestly and openly about what we really believe regarding the biggest issues today." John Major, with a smile, willingly agreed, and for hour after hour all four politicians talked together as candid friends. It was possibly the only time such an extended conversation took place between the party leaders. For eight hours, I sat and listened to the closest British politics came to a team of rivals, sharing their deepest convictions with total openness and friendship. I cherish the memory of those hours because it showed me politics at its best.

An American historian, Doris Kearns Goodwin, wrote a book about Abraham Lincoln called *Team of Rivals*, about how Lincoln had brought together the candidates who stood against him in the presidential election, turning them into a team, to face together the divisive issue of slavery that had brought the nation to civil war. In an earlier age, there used to be a phrase for this kind of thing: "dining with the opposition."

This was civility in its deepest sense. It was as if politicians were playing for different teams, but with the same love of the game, respect for one another's abilities, and an absolute conviction that the team is bigger than the player, and the game is bigger than the



appears to be currently spreading in all directions, with plentiful examples of misogyny, homophobia, anti-Muslim prejudice, antisemitism, personal invective, the attribution of malign motives to opponents, routine comparison between one's political opponents and the Nazis, conspiracy theories, threats of violence, and accusations of treachery. There have even been instances of dehumanization: people on the left calling Conservatives and even Labour moderates, "lower than vermin."

Something similar has been happening in American politics. In 2019, the Center for the

within their zone of interest, but which inevitably gave them a general sense of what was happening elsewhere. The name for this kind of communication is broadcasting.

This has been replaced by narrowcasting: news filtered to reflect our given interest and political stance. The result is that we see the world the way other people like us see the world, and the commentary we read is one that is already in line with our own take on events. This hugely intensifies the confirmation bias that leads us to register and remember facts that support our view, and dismiss and forget those that do not. This tendency is a dangerous flaw in our cognitive capacities-- useful when we were facing predators or rival tribes on the savannah, but hardly relevant to the global twenty-first century. But once social media's algorithms have taken this and amplified it, it becomes very dangerous

There is no doubt that Judaism is not strong on the *civil* element--polite, well-mannered, mild--of civility. The prophets were passionate, not polite. The rabbis were argumentative rather than agreeable.

But Judaism does have three important things to say about why we should "reason together" -- the favorite phrase of Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel, taken from the prophet Isaiah (1:18).

The first is the truly remarkable passage in Genesis 18 in which God discloses in advance to Abraham what he is about to do to Sodom and Gomorrah.

"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do....For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." Then the Lord said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know." (Gen. 18:19-21)

The passage offers no conceivable reason why God would wish to seek Abraham's opinion on the matter. In fact, by the very terms of the biblical narrative, there can be no conceivable reason. There is nothing Abraham might know that God does not know, nor could Abraham possibly have a better sense of justice than God himself. Yet God is clearly inviting a response from Abraham, and indeed it comes, in one of the most radical passages in all religious literature:

Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:23-5)

What is going on here? It seems that we have in this passage a biblical version of the Roman axiom of justice that I have already mentioned: *Audi alteram partem*, "Hear the other side." There cannot be justice if there has been no speech in defense of the accused. That is what Abraham provides here. Even God himself must submit to this rule. There can be no justice in which all sides have not had a hearing. Abraham must defend his neighbors as far as he can, even though their way is not his. That is the first rule of a just society.

The second is an equally radical rabbinic passage, about a debate in the mind of God before h

This is an audacious theological interpretation. God, it suggests, was in two minds before creating mankind. Yes, humanity is capable of great acts of altruism, but it is also endlessly at war. Human beings tell lies and their lives are full of strife. God takes truth and throws it to the ground: for life to be livable, truth on earth cannot be what it is in heaven. Truth in heaven may be platonic-eternal, harmonious, radiant. But man cannot reach to such truth, and if he does, he will create conflict, not peace. Men kill precisely because they believe they possess the truth, while their opponents are in error. In that case, says God, throwing truth to the ground, let human beings live by a different standard of truth, one that is conscious of its limitations. The divine word comes from heaven, but it is interpreted on earth. The divine light is infinite, but to be visible to us it must be refracted through finite understanding. Truth in heaven transcends space and time, but human perception is bounded by both space and time.

What is more, when two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true, the other false. It may be, and often is, that each represents a different perspective on reality, an alternative way of structuring order, no more and no less commensurable--nor contradictory--than a Shakespeare sonnet, a Michelangelo painting, and a Schubert sonata.

God, wrote Rabbi Abraham Kook, "dealt kindly with his world by not putting all the talents in one place, in any one man or nation, not in one generation or even one world." Each culture has something to contribute to the totality of human wisdom. The sages said: "Who is wise? One who learns from all men." This is the Jewish equivalent to the story of

campuses. To win support, people start defining themselves as victims. Public shaming takes the place of judicial establishment of guilt. Civility-- especially respect for people who oppose you--begins to die. The public conversation slowly gives way to a shouting match in which integrity counts for little and noise for much. This is not a culture whose survival can be taken for granted. It is one that is fraying at the seams.

Now we must consider the question of morality itself. What does it have to tell us about the human person and the dignity and meaning of our lives?

For Discussion:

For Levinas, what is the relationship between freedom and moral behavior, or freedom and our responsibility to others?