



Mahloket Matters:

Navigating Inner Challenges and Societal Discord through Jewish Text and Social Emotional Learning

1. The Need: Now More than Ever

Teenagers have always had to navigate the tricky tension between forming an individual identity and a competing need for social belonging. However, today's toxic environment of political polarization, demonization of the other, and a global pandemic has pushed this tension into overdrive.

- **Political Polarization** leaves people feeling pressured and boxed into preconceived extreme categories. The typical teenage questions of identity formation - "Who am I? What do I really believe? Where do I belong?" - have been smothered by all-or-nothing political labels.
- **Demonization of the Other** has robbed people of the ability to genuinely listen and consider an array of opinions. All too often, people make the automatic assumption that those who disagree with them are either morally bankrupt, stupid, or both. This approach leaves teens feeling intimidated, vulnerable, and insecure. They are left wondering, "How do I form my own opinion? Will I be mocked for expressing my real feelings? What's the point of interacting with people who disagree with me?"
- **Global Pandemic** has made everyone anxious, isolated, and on edge. People around the world, including teens, are wondering, "Am I safe? Are the people I love safe? When will things get back to normal?"

2. About the Program

How can we help our students meet these challenges?

The Pardes Center for Jewish Educators (PCJE) believes that the integration of Jewish text study with Social Emotional Learning can help equip students with the cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills they need to better manage these internal and external conflicts. As such, we have created new materials called

Mahloket Matters: Navigating Inner Challenges and Societal Discord through Jewish Text and Social Emotional Learning, which harness Jewish texts and Social Emotional Learning skills in an interactive and experiential manner. These materials were inspired by and adapted from the Pardes *Mahloket Matters: How to Disagree Constructively* project.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) will offer students important life-skills that are especially relevant in these tumultuous times. SEL is a learning process “through which children and adults come to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” [\[Definition of SEL taken from the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)\]](#)

Each of our units will address one or more of the following 5 SEL core competencies: [\[see CASEL Core Competencies\]](#)



Students will learn skills to recognize and manage their emotions so that they feel more in control of themselves and, therefore, more 'safe' overall. They will also learn practical skills to engage with others in a positive way and to transform conflict into opportunities for growth and understanding.

Jewish texts will offer framing and rich source material leading to meaningful discussion and debate about contemporary issues. Various perspectives in our tradition will be explored, thereby creating an opportunity for critical analysis, introspection, and consideration of social values. The Jewish texts will ground students in their ancient tradition as they engage in the process of better understanding themselves, assessing current events, forming their own opinions, and learning how to relate to others with whom they disagree in the spirit of *mahloket l'shem shamayim* (constructive conflict). The texts will also give students an opportunity to draw connections to their other Judaic Studies learning.

The combination of Jewish text study and SEL tools will help students develop the essential competencies, skills, and confidence that they need in order to navigate internal and interpersonal challenges with success.

3. Materials

These units are versatile in that they can be used for in-person or distance learning. They can also be integrated in a variety of contexts. For example, a school may choose to incorporate them into its Judaic Studies curriculum, advisory program, debate club, or as a special series leading up to the November 2020 US presidential election.

Sample Unit Outline

Title: “Showin’ Up”

Essential Question: What internal, external and interpersonal conditions are necessary to set the stage for a difficult conversation to be productive and beneficial?

Lesson 1: Text Frame - “The Conversation that did NOT happen between Moses, Dathan, and Abiram” (Numbers 16)

- Who or what torpedoed the potential conversation between Moses, Dathan, and Abiram?
- How might the outcome of the story been different had the adversaries engaged with each other face to face?
- There are internal, external, and interpersonal conditions that must be met in order to enable both parties to even just show up for a difficult conversation.
- Difficult conversations can be an opportunity for understanding, learning, and growth.

Lesson 2: Internal Conditions - It Starts with Me!

- What is the distinction between *Ohev Shalom* and *Rodef Shalom*? It is important to try and achieve a degree of internal peace before pursuing peace with others.
- Conflict is difficult because it can be emotionally triggering, which compromises access to the parts of the brain that are able to think rationally and empathize.
- Where am I at? I can learn to read my body’s physio-neurological cues to discern readiness/availability for a difficult conversation.

- Reacting vs. Responding: what is the difference?
I can make the choice to pause in a moment of conflict.
- What are healthy ways to process emotions if I am not yet ready to engage?
- I can learn mindfulness-based skills for self-regulation to become ready to engage in conversation, and to grow my capacity to recognize and manage my emotions.

Lesson 3: Interpersonal Conditions

- I need to be clear about my intention when engaging in a difficult conversation. What are my needs? What is my desired outcome?
- How do I craft an invitation to a difficult conversation that is clear, welcoming, and non-aggressive?

Lesson 4: External Conditions - Creating Space

- What can I do to make a space feel safe and supportive for a difficult conversation?
- What is a suitable setting for this particular difficult conversation?
For example, I need to determine whether the conversation should take place in-person or online, one-on-one or with others, in public or in private.
- What agreements can be made that will enable productive discourse?
How can I suggest or invite these agreements between participants?

During this pilot year, the *Mahloket Matters: Navigating Inner Challenges and Societal Discord through Jewish Text and Social Emotional Learning* materials will be available free of charge for schools that are willing and able to commit to provide comprehensive feedback.

To discuss whether your school is an appropriate match to pilot the materials, please contact **Sefi Kraut** at sefik@pardes.org.il

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