

Tolerance and Intolerance – Avot 4:3

הוא הִיָּה אוֹמֵר, אֶל תְּהִי בֹז לְכָל אָדָם, וְאֵל תְּהִי
מִפְּלִיג לְכָל דָּבָר, שְׂאִין לָךְ אָדָם שְׂאִין לוֹ שְׂעָה
וְאִין לָךְ דָּבָר שְׂאִין לוֹ מְקוֹם

He (ben Azzai) used to say: do not despise any man and do not discriminate against any thing, for there is no man that does not have his hour and there is no thing that does not have its place.

A discussion on Tolerance based on Avot 4:3

Some Textual Questions to ask Chanichim:

- Have a look at the previous Mishna also by Ben Azzai. Is there a connection? (see Maharal on Mishna)
- There are 4 parts to this Mishna – what is the ‘chidush’ (new idea) being taught in each part? How can you discriminate against a “thing”?
- The main commentary on this Mishna (Bartenura) says “do not despise” means “do not ask what can person x do to harm me.” – thoughts?
- Ben Azzai says the most important pasuk in the Torah is the creation of man in God’s image. Rabbi Akiva says it is “love your neighbour like yourself.” What is behind this disagreement? Would Rabbi Akiva disagree with this Mishna? Use the Rabbi Sacks source.

Some General Questions to ask Chanichim:

- Compare this text to the famous beginning of Kohelet Chapter 3 – do they agree with each other?
- What is the difference between sympathy, apathy and empathy? How are they connected to tolerance?
- Is intolerance ever a good thing? Is there a spectrum of tolerance or is it binary?
- What are the causes of intolerance? What are the consequences?
- Does complete tolerance result in lack of identity?
- What is the difference between intolerance and hatred?

Some Personal Questions to ask Chanichim:

- Name a time you have shown tolerance or intolerance to a *person? Group? Idea? Thing?*
- Name a time you have shown tolerance/intolerance based on *religion? race? sex? nationality? sexuality? Ability?*
- What can you do to make the world a more tolerant place?

Other sources and quotes to bring into discussion:

Rebbe Nachman:

There are 3 characteristics that if you don’t have *undermine* tefilla. This Mishna is one of them.

Gemara Yerushalmi Terumot 8:

Do not hate even a single non-Jew. When Caesar started subjected Jews to harsh laws the Rabbis went to stop him and he said – I am taking revenge for the mockery you made of me.

Rambam on this Mishna:

Don’t say something bad about someone thinking “it is very far removed that saying this will actually damage him in any way.”

Rambam Hilchot Teshuva – There is no teshuva for saying lashon hara about a group.

Rabbi David Aaron:

When you hear a new idea you try and listen, judge and decide whether you are going to incorporate it into your life all simultaneously. I ask you to just listen and do the other two things later.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (poet):

I have seen great intolerance shown in support of tolerance.

+ A very strange story at the top of Taanit 20b

+ Story of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in Cave

A Related Story:

The day after Martin Luther King was assassinated, Steven Armstrong was the first child to arrive in Jane Elliott's third-grade classroom; he asked "Why'd they shoot that King?" After the rest of the class arrived, Elliott asked them how they think it feels to be a black boy or girl. She suggested to the class that it would be hard for them to understand discrimination without experiencing it themselves and then asked the children if they would like to find out. The children agreed with a chorus of "yeahs". She decided to base the exercise on eye colour rather than skin colour in order to show the children what racial segregation would be like.

On the first day of the exercise, she designated the blue-eyed children as the superior group. Elliott provided brown fabric collars and asked the blue-eyed students to wrap them around the necks of their brown-eyed peers as a method to easily identify the minority group. She gave the blue-eyed children extra privileges, such as second helpings at lunch, access to the new jungle gym, and five extra minutes at recess. The blue-eyed children sat in the front of the classroom, and the brown-eyed children were sent to sit in the back rows. The blue-eyed children were encouraged to play only with other blue-eyed children and to ignore those with brown eyes. Elliott would not allow brown-eyed and blue-eyed children to drink from the same water fountain and often told off the brown-eyed students when they did not follow the exercise's rules or made mistakes.

At first, there was resistance among the students in the minority group to the idea that blue-eyed children were better than brown-eyed children. To counter this, Elliott lied to the children by stating that melanin was linked to their higher intelligence and learning ability. Shortly thereafter, this initial resistance fell away. Those who were deemed "superior" became arrogant, bossy, and otherwise unpleasant to their "inferior" classmates. Their grades on simple tests were better, and they completed mathematical and reading tasks that had seemed outside their ability before. The "inferior" classmates also transformed – into timid and subservient children who scored more poorly on tests, and even during recess isolated themselves, including those who had previously been dominant in the class. These children's academic performance suffered, even with tasks that had been simple before.

The next Monday Elliott reversed the exercise, making the brown-eyed children superior. While the brown-eyed children did taunt the blue-eyed children in ways similar to what had occurred the previous day, Elliott reports it was much less intense. At 2:30 on that Wednesday, Elliott told the blue-eyed children to take off their collars. To reflect on the experience, she asked the children to write down what they had learned.

The “experiment” received much public attention –a lot of it was negative. **What would Ben Azzai say about this experiment?**

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

“The Test of Faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognise God’s image in someone who is not in my image, who’s language, faith, ideal, is different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his.”

Some Interactive Resources:

SLAM poetry – Harry Baker – “Purple Paper People.”

Poem – Martin Neimouller – “First they came for the socialists...”

Experiment – Four minutes of silent eye contact – Experiments on empathy have shown that this has some crazy effects – split into pairs and try it. Be open to anything happening!

Film – Derren Brown – “Sacrifice.”

Monsters Inc. – What is the broader message of this movie? How does the relationship between monsters and humans develop through the film?