



***THE ART OF FIGHTING* by Priya Parker** **Jewish Conversation Guide**

with Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg and Life is a Sacred Text

This is a guide to Priya Parker's important new book, *The Art of Fighting: The Transforming Power of Conflict*. It can be used as a standalone discussion program or in hevruta/paired discussion, keyed to the themes of the High Holy Days or beyond.

If you're facilitating this discussion: A rich conversation is one that engages the right questions for your group, which might include all of them together. It might include some of these in hevruta/paired study and some as a group, and it might include choosing the questions selectively, depending on the flow of the conversation, the needs of the community, or the time you have available.

While reading the book is not required for engaging with this conversation guide, we strongly recommend getting and reading the book to get the best possible benefit out of the material and the subjects it raises.

If you haven't ordered the book yet, you can order it from your favorite bookstore [here](#). And through September 8th, you can pre-order a personalized, signed copy from Books Are Magic [here](#).

Don't forget to register for Parker's session on Conflict as a Democratic Skill online September 2nd at lifeisasacredtext.com/learntodo.

1) In the prologue to *The Art of Fighting*, Priya Parker admits that she's conflict averse:

"I am 100 percent purebred, third-generation ostrich on both sides: I want to put my head in the sand until the fighting stops."

- How would you gauge your own comfort around conflict?
- What are some of your early memories of conflict?
- How, if at all, do you think your Jewishness has informed your relationship to addressing discomfort—culturally, religiously, or in some other way?
- What conflicts currently exist in your life that you're avoiding?
 - (Optional: Write them down, whether or not you share with the group.)

2) Parker explores the concept of “us-ness,” the shared motives or interests that define a group.

"Members know who they are and how they do things around here." Or, as Buber put it, "Our relationship lives in the space between us."

Think about the groups in your life.

- Can you identify the points of “us-ness” in them?
- Can you articulate what the Jewish sense of "us-ness" is?
- Do you think there's a distinct sense of "us-ness" in this specific community that differs from a larger sense of "us-ness" as part of the Jewish people? Why / why not?
- Has your sense of Jewish "us-ness" changed over time? Why or why not?
- Are there places where you feel tension with Jewish "us-ness"? Are there places where that "us-ness" helps you feel more connected?

3) Parker identifies four different types of conflict:

1. **Kerfuffles** are low stakes, don't touch on any existential questions for the group.
 2. **Hairline fractures** are small eruptions that nonetheless touch on core questions about the group's identity or purpose.
 3. **Brawls** can be explosive but don't threaten any sense of "who we are" for a group.
 4. A **rift**, however, happens when people who had been bound to one another *"begin to reexamine what it is they belong to, what they want it to be, whether it's for them."*
- Can you think of some examples from your own life and/or contemporary community conversations in which this matrix might be relevant?

Now let's look at some sources with this matrix in mind. Read each of the following four texts out loud, and with each, consider:

- What kinds of conflicts might these sources be describing? (Kerfuffles? Hairline fractures? Brawls? Rifts?)
- Might these sources help us address any of the conflicts in question? If so, how?
- To what situations or contexts do you think each of these sources might *not* apply?

כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, סופה להתקיים. ושאין לה לשם שמים, אין סופה להתקיים.

Every argument that is for [the sake of] heaven's name is destined to endure. But if it is not for [the sake of] heaven's name -- it is not destined to endure. (Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:17)

...אמר ר"ל מכאן שאין מחזיקין במחלוקת דאמר רב כל המחזיק במחלוקת עובר בלאו ...

... Reish Lakish says: ... one may not perpetuate a dispute, as Rav says: Anyone who perpetuates a dispute violates a prohibition.... [That is, even the aggrieved party must seek to end a dispute.] (Talmud Sanhedrin 110a)

אע"פ שנחלקו ב"ש [כנגד ב"ה] בצרות [ואחיות] ובספק אשת איש ובגט ישן [והמקדש את האשה] בשוה פרוטה [והמגרש] את אשתו ולנה עמו בפונדק לא נמנעו ב"ש לישא [נשים] מב"ה ולא ב"ה מב"ש אלא נהגו האמת והשלום... אע"פ שאלו אוסרין ואלו מתירין לא נמנעו עושין טהרות אלו ע"ג אלו

Even though the School of Shammai were divided against the School of Hillel regarding [who was kosher to marry whom with regards to several points of Jewish law], the School of Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from the School of Hillel, nor did the School of Hillel from the School of Shammai. Rather, they conducted themselves with truth and peace between them... [Similarly,] even though these prohibited and those permitted [in matters of purity], they did not refrain from the preparation of ritually pure foods [using the vessels of the other] ... (Tosefta Yevamot 1:3)

אמר רבי אבא אמר שמואל: שלש שנים נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל, הללו אומרים: הלכה כמותנו, והללו אומרים: הלכה כמותנו. יצאה בת קול ואמרה: אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים הן, והלכה כבית הלל. וכי מאחר שאלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים, מפני מה זכו בית הלל לקבוע הלכה כמותן? מפני שנזחין ועלובין היו, ושזנין דבריהן ודברי בית שמאי, ולא עוד אלא שמקדימין דברי בית שמאי לדבריהן.

Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel disagreed. These said: Jewish law is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: Jewish law is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, Jewish law is in accordance with the opinion of the School of Hillel. The Talmud asks: Since both these and those are the words of the living God, why was the School of Hillel privileged to have the law established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the law they would teach both their own statements and the statements of the School of Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of the School of Shammai to their own statements, in deference to the School of Shammai. (Talmud Eruvin 13b)

4) Parker notes that *“not all conflict avoidance is conflict aversion.”*

In one example, she describes a group of adults with lifelong friendships struggling to reconcile their love for their friends with a sense of despair over their views. In the end, the women chose not to confront their friends because *“they weren’t going to go in and renovate a worldview.”* Likewise, the Book of Proverbs teaches:

פּוֹטֵר מִיָּמִים רַאשִׁית מִדּוֹן וְלִפְנֵי הַתְּגָלָע הָרִיב נָטוּשׁ:

Starting conflict is like opening a sluice; Before a quarrel flares up, drop it. (Proverbs 17:14)

- What's the significance of addressing conflicts before they "flare up"?
- What does "drop it" mean in the context of preventing disputes?
- Has there been a time in your life when you similarly chose not to confront? Do you think you were right to do so? How do you think the other person experienced that situation?
- How might one discern when to address conflict and not? What might the stakes be, and for whom?

5) Parker also writes that one of the most important elements of artful fighting is making sure the group is having the *“right fight.”*

- When's a time when you've had the “right fight” in a relationship or group?
- When's a time that you thought or realized later that you were having the wrong fight (or debating over the wrong questions or frame)?

Above, we saw a quote from the Mishnah about *“arguments for the sake of Heaven.”* About this, the 15th c. Italian rabbi Ovadia ben Avraham of Bertenoro (known as the Bartenura) commented,

הַמַּחֲלָקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, הַתְּכָלִית וְהַסּוֹף הַמְּבֻקָּשׁ מֵאוֹתָהּ מַחֲלָקֶת לְהַשִּׁיג הָאֱמֶת, וְזֶה מִתְקַיֵּם, ... וּמַחֲלָקֶת שֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, תְּכָלִית הַנִּרְצָה בָּהּ הִיא בְּקִשְׁתׇּת הַשָּׂרָרָה וְאַהֲבַת הַנִּצּוּחַ, וְזֶה הַסּוֹף אֵינוֹ מִתְקַיֵּם,

The argument which is for the sake of Heaven, the purpose and aim that is sought from that argument is to arrive at the truth, and this endures ... And [with] argument which is not for the sake of Heaven, its desired purpose is to achieve power and the love of contention, and its end will not endure... (Bartenura on Pirkei Avot 5:17)

- Does this text feel like a useful starting place for figuring out whether or not you're in the “right fight”? Why or why not? If not, what (text or idea) might be?

6) Parker notes that even if a conflict is non-violent, all conflict is physical.

"Our brains experience critique as if we were being physically attacked," she writes.

- Have you ever noticed how your mind and body feel during a conflict?
- How does that impact how you experience a situation, the other person, and your willingness to engage with interpersonal challenges?
- How might your own personal or our communal history impact that response?
- What helps, and why?

7) Parker introduces a term in the book from the conflict resolution facilitator, Sethu Nair: **"relational longing,"** which she describes as *"one of the most important superpowers you can tap into when seeking to resolve and transform a conflict."*

Parker defines relational longing as, *"the residual desire within us to connect to someone or something, even when we're hurt or mad."*

In one example, she describes a church that chooses to learn a different way of being in conversation together as they approach the decision whether or not to allow same-sex marriage in their congregation. She describes how the pastor is able to get the congregants to talk through their own personal experiences across this divide while still yearning to be in community together.

- Have you experienced a personal sense of relational longing when also deeply angry or hurt by someone in your life? If so, what was it like?
- Have you experienced a feeling of relational longing while feeling hurt or angry about larger communal issues? What's difficult about it? How, as Parker intimates, might it be useful?
- How might you tap into that deeper river of longing even *in* conflict?
- How might this sense of longing connect to the work of *tshuvah*, of returning, repair—that happens during the High Holy days and all year long?

8) In the book's epilogue, Parker muses on applying the practices of the book to her own most important relationships.

There, she notes, *"Fights aren't a calamity or a moral failure. Fights make and remake us."*

This feels particularly relevant to us as Jews during our autumn season of repair and returning, as we so often struggle to find our way back to one another authentically.

- How do you see the themes discussed here addressing the work of the Jewish work of *tshuvah*, of repentance and repair?
- In what sense is this a seasonal issue and in what sense is this an all-year-long issue?
- Where does the work of accountability meet the work of resolving conflict?
- Where does your own personal list of unresolved conflicts from Question 1 fit into this conversation?

What's one concrete takeaway that you have from this conversation?

You can purchase The Art of Fighting everywhere books are sold.
But if it's before September 8th, you can get a signed copy if you pre-order it through BOOKS ARE MAGIC.