

How to Stand Up to a Jewish Bully

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I wish it weren't so, but there are Jewish bullies out there. They will tell you that you're doing it wrong (no matter what the "it" is) and they will correct you. These bullies speak with great authority and confidence. They are sure they know the right way to do a thing and that if you're not doing it exactly that way, then you aren't doing it correctly. Let me give you a relatively benign example.

I was in a kosher restaurant. I paid and put the change in a *pushke* (charity box). The man behind me spoke right up and said, "You put the *tsedakah* in with your left hand and that's not correct. You should give *tsedakah* from your right hand." When people bully me on so small a level, I don't mind. If I'd been in the mood, or had the time, I would have challenged his assertion and asked him to verify the authority by which he spoke or reminded him that *tsedakah* from either hand is still a good thing.

It doesn't have to be a person bullying you. Books can do it, too. Prayer books that say you must take these many steps at this point in the service or turn in one direction first rather than another sound really authentic. You almost unthinkingly conform to them without thinking about it. But are the books right? By what authority do they speak? Generally, such directions are more about style points than actual *mitzvot*.

But when these bullies actually transgress the most fundamental tenets of Judaism, they need to be put in their place. Let's look at the following hypothetical case. A person raised in an Orthodox family leaves the family home because they are gay but then returns for a visit. During the whole visit, they hear over and over how homosexuality is a sin. They leave feeling worse than when they came and their feelings are terribly wounded. The family is sure they are right. They don't think they are bullying but they are. So how do you fight back?

I live in Texas, so I see battles in terms of gunfights at the OK Corral. And when you get in a gunfight, you want the biggest weapon possible. What's that weapon? Talmud. That's one of the reasons we study it. It's wonderful and inspiring but it can also serve to empower us in situations like this.

For such a situation, I'd use Bavli Baba Metsia 58ff, which tells us that hurting someone else's feelings is so spiritually toxic that you go to Gehenna for it and never gets out and that hurting someone emotionally in public is tantamount to murder. Did it address the main point? No. They will never be convinced that homosexuality is ok. But it might convince them that they ought to think a bit before they speak with such certainty that they are right.

Of course, pick your battles. The guy with the *pushke* advice had been taught something and it was meaningful for him so I didn't want to take that away from him. I can let go of advice in a book by simply ignoring what it says or using a different one. But people trumpeting their righteousness while hurting someone's feelings - now they've crossed the line.

Discussion Questions

1. In general, the way to win against a Jewish bully is to (a) demand they show you the text upon which they base their statements and (b) counter with another text. This means that you'll either have to have your "gun" loaded by studying the texts ahead of time or loaded up afterward so you'll be prepared for next time. Have you ever been in a situation where you had the right text at hand? When you wished you had the text, but didn't? What happened? (Maybe I can supply you with the text now!)
2. If you're ambushed, that's one thing. But if there's a high probability that someone will bully you, try preparing in advance. For example, if you're a woman who wants to wear her *tallit* and you

know someone will say you can't, go in with the text that confirms that women are OBLIGATED to wear *tsitsit* (B. Menachot 43a). Turns out that a lone sage says women aren't obligated and in all such cases, the anonymous majority wins. Offer to study that page of Talmud with them.

3. Be careful not to create emotional damage. Not that you should let people be bullies or be wrong, but consider whether you'll be sinning yourself. Try to spare people's feelings if you can. How would you balance these dual desires: self-defense and compassion?
4. Remember that every hurt you endure actually makes you more skilled at compassion. Not that you should silently endure damaging wounds, but that if you do, remember there may actually be an upside to them.

As always, I look forward to your insights!