

Lesson 4: Exploring the Difference Between Differences

Time needed: 60 minutes

Recommended age range: 7-12th grade

Objectives:

- Students will explore how difference functions in their lives
- Students will be introduced to the ways that communities make sense of differences, and how mere distinctions can come to be imbued with moral connotations

Materials: Copies of the text, one per each pair of students

Instructions:

- 1 Explain to participants that you are going to examine some Jewish texts about difference and how Jewish tradition understands types of difference.
- 2 Begin the discussion by examining difference using the following questions (Take about 10 minutes for this part of the activity.):
 - What is difference?
 - How are you different from others?
 - What makes a difference positive, negative, neutral? What makes you notice a difference?
 - What is the difference between an obvious difference and a hidden one?
 - How does being different feel? How does someone else's difference make us feel?
 - What is the upside of sameness, of being like everyone else? Is there a downside?
 - What is the difference between these differences?
 - Eye color (brown, green, hazel, blue)
 - Hair color (blonde, red, brown, black)
 - Skin color (black, brown, yellow, red, and white)
 - Height (tall – short)
 - Strength (weak – strong)
 - Intelligence (stupid, slow, thick, simple minded – smart, fast, brainy, clever, intellectual)
 - Wealth (poor-wealthy)
 - Build (skinny, thin – fat, husky)
 - Beauty (ugly – beautiful)
 - Age (young, energetic, immature, naïve, childlike – old, mature, wise, over-the-hill)
 - Disability (handicapped – able bodied)
 - Religion (Christian – Jew) (Moslem, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Baha'i, Sikh, Christian, Jew)



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What does the following statement mean to you? Eve Sedgwick: “Difference is not the problem. The problem is the **difference between differences.**”

- 3 After discussing the meaning of difference, hand out the texts below and ask participants to work in pairs to read the texts and respond to the questions on the handout. You may decide to focus on only one text or break the participants into two groups with one group focusing on the first text by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and one group focusing on the second text about the disagreement between Rabbi Yosef and Rabbi Abaye. (Give the participants 15 minutes.)
- 4 Bring the group back together and ask participants to briefly share their responses to the texts and the questions.
- 5 Now as a group consider the following questions:
 - How might these texts help us to think about difference with respect to sexual orientation and gender diversity?
 - Would these texts support or challenge movements to celebrate the full diversity of gender identity and sexual orientation in the Jewish community?



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Lesson 4, Text Study 1

Blessing Differences

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף נה עמוד ב
אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: הרואה את הבהקנים אומר ברוך משנה הבריות. מיתבי: ראה את הכושי ואת הגיחור ואת הלוקן ואת הקפח ואת הננס ואת הדרניקוס אומר ברוך משנה את הבריות. את הקטע ואת הסומא ואת פתויי הראש ואת ההגר ואת המוכה שחין ואת הבהקנים אומר ברוך דיין אמת! - לא קשיא, הא - ממעי אמו, הא - בתר דאיתיליד

BT Berachot 58b

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: One who sees an albino says: “Blessed (is the One who) differentiates the creatures.” They asked a question: [Does this not seem to contradict what] We learn in the *baraita*? One who sees a very black person, a very red person, a very white person, a very tall person, a dwarf, or a *hadranikos* (unclear meaning) says: “Blessed (is the One who) differentiates the creatures.” [While the one who sees] a paraplegic, a blind person, a lame person, a flat-headed person, a person smitten with boils, or person with patches of skin discoloration (vitiligo) says: “Blessed is the true judge.” No contradiction! This [is a difference] from the womb of the mother, (i.e. from birth); this [is a difference occurring] after birth.

- 1 What is “normal” for the author of this text?
- 2 What does the first blessing, “who differentiates the creatures,” say about the people over whom we say it?
- 3 What does it say about those of us who recite it?
- 4 What does it say about our understanding of G-d?
- 5 What does it say about the meaning of differences between people?
- 6 Do you think a giant should say the blessing upon seeing a giant?
- 7 What might it feel like to hear someone say this blessing upon seeing you?
- 8 What does the second blessing, “the true judge,” say about the people over whom we say it?
- 9 What does it say about us, about G-d and human life?
- 10 What do you think it means that this second blessing is the same blessing we are instructed to say when we learn someone has died?
- 11 “Sinister” is Latin for left-handedness. It came to mean dishonest and even malicious or evil. How do physical differences between people come to have moral meanings?
- 12 What do you think makes a difference appear like a rare color in God’s palette, and what makes a difference appear ugly rather than beautiful?



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Lesson 4, Text Study 2

The Miracle Gender Bender

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף נג עמוד ב

תנו רבנן: מעשה באחד שמתה אשתו והניחה בן לינק, ולא היה לו שכר מניקה ליתן, ונעשה לו נס ונפתחו לו דדין כשני דדי אשה והניק את בנו. אמר רב יוסף: בא וראה כמה גדול אדם זה, שנעשה לו נס כזה! אמר לו אביי: אדרבה, כמה גרוע אדם זה שנשתנו לו סדרי בראשית.

BT Shabbat 53b

There once was a man whose wife died and left him with an infant to suckle and he could not afford to pay a wet nurse. A miracle occurred and he grew breasts like a woman's two breasts and he nursed his child. R. Yosef said: Come and see just how great this man is that such a miracle was performed for him! Abaye said: On the contrary. How bad is this man that the orders of nature were changed for him.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 R. Yosef and Abaye have very different responses to the story of the man who grew breasts. Fundamentally, what do you think is their disagreement?
- 2 Where does difference feel monstrous in our lives, and where does it feel wondrous?
- 3 Why does difference feel so difficult or even scary sometimes?
- 4 People who are different from us can remind us that things can always change in our lives -- and something like this could happen to us. We think, "It could have been me." Share a time where you have felt that "it could have been you." What was that like?
- 5 What do you do to get over your difficulties in relating to people who are different? How do you turn a monster into a wonder? How do you truly welcome those who are different?
- 6 How does your community or congregation become a place that can turn monsters into wonders, a place that all kinds of people can see as their home?

This text study was created by Rabbi Steve Greenberg for Keshet. We encourage you to download this resource and share it with others, as long as you credit Rabbi Steve Greenberg and Keshet.



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