



## PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

### S1E4: INTERPERSONAL AND INTERFAITH CONFLICT

#### WITH RABBI JOE BLACK

**Rabbi Joe Black:** We can agree to disagree. We can disagree vociferously. But when we see the humanity and understand why we feel the way we do, that is the first step towards resolving conflict or agreeing to disagree in a way that respects the, the holiness implanted within us.

**Sam Fuqua:** That's Rabbi Joe Black on interpersonal and interfaith conflict. He's our guest on this edition of Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy and respectful communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds.

Welcome to Well, That Went Sideways! I'm Sam Fuqua, joined as always by my co-host, Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

**Jes Rau:** Hey there.

**Sam Fuqua:** We're very pleased to have with us for this episode, Rabbi Joe Black, who's a senior rabbi at Temple Emmanuel in Denver. Rabbi Black, thank you for speaking with us today.

**Rabbi Joe Black:** It's my honor.

**Sam Fuqua:** Let's start with a general question. What are the common conflicts that you see or that you speak with the members of your congregation about? What, what, what are the recurring themes when it comes to things that are conflicting for people at, uh, Temple Emmanuel?

**Rabbi Joe Black:** There's an old phrase that says, "If you have two Jews, you have three opinions." So, Jews like to argue. Um, you know, I think they're on multiple levels. You know, I, and as a, as a member of the clergy, as a rabbi, I deal with people on, on family issues, uh, divorce, marriage, parents and children, um, spiritual issues, issues about, you know, involvement in the community, and life cycle events. So that's, that's one sort of, uh, category, you know, box, you can put things in. But then there are also other issues, um, both within the Jewish community, like say, around relationship with the State of Israel or, uh, or, or relationship, you know, spiritually with God or with tradition. But we also have issues, you know, we're a large congregation, uh, politically, certainly in this very, very, uh, toxic, I use that word deliberately, political environment. Uh, it's very, very hard to, to say, well, let me, lemme rephrase that. In, in the environment politically in which we are, there is not one key thing that we can all agree on. Uh, whether it's about, um, leadership, whether it's about response to the, to the pandemic, whether it's about, uh, economic issues, racial issues, they're, I mean, we are not a unilateral congregation.

**Sam Fuqua:** Well, there's a lot to, uh, to choose from there in that answer. Um, let me start, since as we record this, uh, in late June, uh, we are, we are in the midst of, uh, of uprisings throughout this country and, uh, the Black Lives Matter movement is front and center. Now, within your congregation, you may, I, I read a blog post you wrote about this, so I know you've, uh, observed that some members of your congregation may not recognize white privilege and might think, well, uh, I'm a Jew, I'm part of an oppressed and discriminated, uh, group of people, and I, I don't think that that, uh, that white privilege really, uh, applies to me. I'm oversimplifying there, but, uh, how do you talk to people about Black Lives Matter who may be coming at it from that place?



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**Black:** Well, you know, I, I think it's important to underst, I'm gonna take a step back. It's important to understand why people are reacting the way they do. Whether it's out of fear, which I think probably most of the time it is. Whether it's fear, uh, that's, that's not necessarily racially motivated on the surface, but fear of change, fear of upsetting the apple cart, fear, fear of losing, um, one's place. So that's, that's one level. Um, I think it also depends on who they've been talking to and who they've been listening to. I mean, we have members of our congregation, uh, on the political left and on the political right. And as we know, there's a lot of diatribe, but not a lot of dialogue, going on in our society today. Um, so, you know, I, it's, there's not an easy answer to the question, I guess.

**Jes Rau:** I know you do quite a bit of interfaith work. What does that look like for your congregation?

**Rabbi Joe Black:** Um, not every member of my congregation is a white Ashkenazi, you know, European heritage, uh, person who was born Jewish. We have people of color in our, in our congregation. We have people who have converted to Judaism. We have interfaith households in our congregation. Um, there we have, uh, LGBTQ, um, people in our congregation. I mean, truly, we are a very, very diverse community, which is not what people expect when you think of a, of a, of a synagogue, but that's not the case. So, people are coming from their own personal experience as well as their own personal prejudices that they've inherited.

**Jes Rau:** What are the ways you see interfaith conflict show up on an interpersonal level, whether within your congregation or in society?

**Rabbi Joe Black:** I mean, it depends how you define interfaith, right? Uh, because even within the Christian community, you know, when somebody says, I'm a Christian, right? That means very different things. If you say, I am a fundamentalist Christian, or I am a, a member of a more mainstream or liberal church. If you're a member of the Unitarian Universalists or if you're a Southern Baptist, you both can call yourself Christian, but that means very different things. And, and, and those names, and those labels also make, people make assumptions about them as well. So, within our congregation, absolutely. I mean, the, the, most of the interfaith work that I do, and we as a community do, um, is in areas where we agree. So, for example, we're part of the Interfaith Alliance, uh, which is a wonderful organization here in town. Um, and we do a lot of work on issues that, for the most part, we feel is important. Issues of social justice. Issues of racial equality. Issues of, you know, hunger and, and homelessness and, and gun control, and women's rights. And, we tend to swing a little bit more to the left. Not everyone in my congregation agrees with that, but that's, that's where I am at least politically, although I tried not to couch it in political terms because for me, these are moral issues more than they are political issues, whereas some people might label them as political. So, actually most of the dealings we have with, with peoples of other faith traditions are areas upon which we agree.

**Sam Fuqua:** So that's a strategy, right? In one sense, focus on where you have common ground and where you don't just...

**Rabbi Joe Black:** Yeah.

**Sam Fuqua:** ...leave it. But how do we move forward if we're always just leaving it and not, um, necessarily confronting the conflicts we have?

**Rabbi Joe**

**Black:** You know, I, I have, uh, I'm, I'm very good at answering both sides of a question. So that's, I've learned, I think because I, I'm, I think too much sometimes. I, I'd love it if I could just be ideologically pure consistently, but I can't do that just 'cause I think too much. I, I, you know, there, let me give you a, a great example. So, the Catholic church and the, and the Jewish community. There are things on which we have worked very closely on. Homelessness, um, death penalty issues, but we don't touch abortion rights. We don't go near it because we know we're not gonna be able to talk about that. And I think actually, when you look at an organization like the Interfaith Alliance, we've also, we, we, you know, I've, I've spent a lot of time working with the leadership of that organization and we realize there are things that we can't be talking about, uh, because it's only gonna get, we're only gonna find that we, we're, have to go back to our own corners, be at loggerheads, and we're not gonna accomplish anything. So on the one hand, Sam and Jes, the, um, the, the need to get things done. You know, a key component of community organizing is find things upon which you can have common ground and work to achieve those and leave the rest for later. Yeah, that is a strategy that we use. Absolutely.

But there are also issues about which we are passionate and you can't, so for example, I am not gonna allow my congregation, and you, you're, you talked about the blog post that I wrote. Um, if someone comes up to me and says, "Rabbi, you shouldn't say Black Lives Matter. You should say, all lives matter." I'll say, "I'm, I'm sorry. I can't accept that." Because to me, that is a statement that denies a fundamental reality that our nation is struggling with right now. And to say all lives matter is to gloss over, is to pretend that it's not an issue, where it is. I, I cannot allow that to go unsaid. Whereas, I may have people in my congregation who feel differently about financial issues, economic issues, we can, we can agree to disagree. Even on Israel. I mean this, you know, Israel is certainly not, there are members of my congregation who feel that I am too far to the left on Israel, and there are members of my congregation who feel that I, or we as a community are too far to the right. I like that. That means that we're doing it right. You know, if, if people are disagreeing with what we're doing, that means if on both sides, then we're doing the right thing, I think. Um, but it really depends on the issue.

**Jes Rau:** Often the things we disagree about continue to get into the way of what we do agree about. What are some strategies people can use when they feel stuck in the ways they disagree?

**Rabbi Joe Black:** The most important is to sit down one-on-one and talk about it. That's what I found. And you know, I'm speaking maybe from the perspective of someone who has a pulpit, and I use that pulpit to express views that are based on what I feel are essential Jewish values. So for example, I gave a sermon, uh, last year on the high holy days, uh, talking about the need to engage in dialogue, uh, with and understand our relationship to the African American community. And there are people who were very upset by that sermon. They said, "How dare you call me a racist? I'm not a racist. I don't hate black people. I love everybody." And, and, and I said, "Well, let's sit down and talk about it." So, I had several conversations in my study where people sat down and said, "Rabbi, I really find it hard for you to say that 'cause that's against what I believe." So I said, "Let's talk about it." And at the end of the conversation, I may not have convinced them or they may not have convinced me, but the most important thing is that I don't demonize them, and they don't demonize me. Conflict is an essential part of life. Conflict avoidance, I believe, is a way of destroying community. We can agree that our values are, are similar although we may not apply them the same way. But if we can't sit down and talk about it, then we're going to lose. So what I do, and every, anybody says something to me or to someone else, they don't often say it to me directly, but if I hear about it, I will call 'em up and I say, "I understand you're upset. Let's sit down. Let's have a cup of coffee. Let's find out what we're like as human beings, not as ideas or as, as platforms." You know, as a nation we've become so divided, and again, this, this construct that I, I, I harp on all the time, the



difference between diatribe and dialogue. We can agree to disagree. We can disagree vociferously. But when we see the humanity and understand why we feel the way we do, that is the first step towards resolving conflict or agreeing to disagree in a way that respects the, the holiness implanted within us.

**Sam Fuqua:** I wanted to ask how you handle when things get heated over conflict in the moment. So, maybe you could, uh, give us a, a glimpse into your study and let's say you have, whether it's the, the discussion of racial issues and someone says, "You're calling me a racist," or maybe it's a couple who have come to you for counseling and they get into a heated argument. What do you do to diffuse that in the moment?

**Rabbi Joe Black:** Well, my initial instinct is to run away.

**Sam Fuqua:** Mine too.

**Rabbi Joe Black:** I, I am, I, you know, I've, I've learned about myself over the years that my, my, uh, I was raised at a home that was conflict avoidant, and that's part of who I am. But I've also learned that I can't allow that to be my main method of dealing with things. So I try not to. You know, I don't like to make blanket statements. I, I, I think the, the other than, uh, to the, the, the, okay, a successful outcome of a conflict, a situation where there's conflict is for people to leave that situation not necessarily having their minds changed or convince the other party, but to understand that the conflict does not define the relationship. That you are in relationship for whatever reason. Whether it is a relationship of business, a relationship of convenience, a relationship of love, because there is something about being with another person or another group that makes the world a better place. And I, in religious terms, I would say it's seeing the godliness implanted within every human being. So the, the best outcome would be where people can say, I, you know, I thought that you said this to hurt me, but I now see that you said this because it's part of what you firmly believe. I may not believe it, but I have to respect you for having that belief and let's find an area, you know, getting back to your earlier question upon (a) either we can work on that, we can agree on, or that we can understand that even though we don't agree on it, there are more, that our relationship is more important than the disagreement.

**Jes Rau:** People seem to be struggling right now in a really unique way because conflicts feel so deeply rooted in what they consider to be their core values. How do we navigate conflict that feels like it's cutting to the core of who we are?

**Rabbi Joe Black:** I think I would start, and I, I, I was, as I was answering one of the questions earlier, I, I, I said something I wanna expand on, and I think it, it goes to your answer too. Um, there are many kinds of relationships in which we get involved. You know, the theologian, Martin Buber, talked about the difference between an I-Thou relationship and an I-It relationship. An I-It relationship is a relationship of business, of, of interaction, of, of, um, uh, I'm looking for a word here, uh, I, I need something from you, you need something from me. We agree to provide it to each other. So, I go to the store, uh, you know, I buy a pair of socks, I give the money to my clerk when we can go to the stores in person someday, God willing. Um, or I go on Amazon, whatever. And that is a, uh, a, uh, that type, one type of relationship. An I-Thou relationship, on the other hand, is a relationship on a deeper level. It's a soul relationship. It's where Buber would say, we come to understand what it means to have an understanding and relationship with God. That our relationships with other people become the framework around which we understand what it means to have a relationship with the holy. And, that can be a dear friend. It can be a spouse. It can be a lover. It can be a teacher, yeah, a student. It can be where you, you rise to a higher spiritual plane and, and



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there is a

value inherent. We need both types of relationships, but it's through the I-Thou relationship that we don't necessarily get things done, but we find how our life has meaning and purpose. And I think there has to be an understanding that there are things that we have to do just to get things done. You know, we have to pay our taxes. We have to buy groceries. We have to do all the essential things that are done. And that makes us, that allows us to take care of our physical needs. But there are also spiritual truths and needs that not only give our life meaning and purpose, but, but help us to see how we fit into the bigger scope of the universe. And those are relationships that need to be cherished. If conflict arise in an I-It relationship, you can have another one. If conflict arises in an I-Thou relationship, then you need to do hard work to get beyond it. And I think that is part of the, the holy work of conflict resolution.

**Sam Fuqua:** The words that came to mind for me were, uh, the first type of relationship is transactional. And maybe the second type is...

**Rabbi Joe Black:** That's the word I was looking for. Thank you.

**Sam Fuqua:** Yeah. Transform, and the, and the other one is transformative, potentially.

**Rabbi Joe Black:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Sam Fuqua:** Is there anything you'd like to add and anything else to keep top of mind?

**Rabbi Joe Black:** Yeah, I would just add, um, uh, that, you know, don't allow either fear of conflict or frankly, for some people, love of conflict, to impact the key relationships in your lives that give you and those whom you care about meaning and purpose. That, it's essential. Conflict is normal. Conflict is a part of anything. And, how you move beyond that conflict and how you make that, uh, a stepping stone to a higher consciousness, is key.

**Sam Fuqua:** Oh, Rabbi Joe Black, thank you so much for speaking with us.

**Rabbi Joe Black:** My honor.

**Sam Fuqua:** Rabbi Joe Black is the senior rabbi at Temple Emmanuel in Denver.

Our podcast is called Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, [sidewayspod.org](http://sidewayspod.org). We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's [sidewayspod.org](http://sidewayspod.org). Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. And this podcast is a partnership with The Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at [conflictcenter.org](http://conflictcenter.org).



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