

A couple of years ago, I was introduced to the idea/word of micro aggressions by Iris Gomez in the context of the membership committee and how we can always become more welcoming to members and prospective members. According to the Webster dictionary, “a micro aggression is a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group.” The idea of a micro aggression reminded me of a few people throughout my tenure at CJC who have shared with me offensive comments they received from other congregants. Some of the comments have to do with preconceived notions of people of color, members of the G/L/B/T community and/or how women should or should not act. Since then the membership committee has been creating programs to help us understand what we do without even thinking or being aware of how our words affect others. After all, how we treat each other is a central part of being a *kehillah kedosha*, a sacred community. How can we even think about being a *kehillah kedosha* if we do not think about how what we say and do and how it affects other members of our community or other people who are visiting our community?

Last spring, the membership committee had a wonderful program defining what a micro aggression was. There were enough members who attended so that we could have healthy discussions at different tables. During these discussions, there were many important ideas shared and lessons learned. One idea was discussed in one form or the other at every table. The question was “Does the intent of the person who committed the microaggression matter? Should we assume that they were speaking out of ignorance and meant no harm? Or is how the comment affected the victim the only thing that mattered?” The answers to these questions seemed to influence how people responded to the person who committed the microaggression.

In other words, assume for a minute that we all agree that the comment itself was offensive. The question becomes, what do we do about it? Do we walk away fuming? Do we assume that it was an innocent remark and let it pass? Do we confront the person out in public space or in private? Do we couch our rebuke in anger or in understanding? There is no easy answer to these questions. I am grateful that there is great Jewish wisdom to learn from on this topic. Although the rabbis might not have known what a microaggression was, there is nothing new about being offensive and hurting another person unfairly.

So this is what we are going to do today. I have prepared a sheet of quotes that I would like you all to study in small groups of 2-4 people. Each group will be focusing on a different quote that I will assign you. When you are done with the first quote continue on in order. No one group will study all the quotes. The sheets have the questions on it that I would like you to think about. I will be a floater and can answer any questions as you encounter them. After about 7 minutes, I will bring you all together and we will share the answers in a succinct and brief manner. Then I have given you each a case that really did happen at CJC. I will ask you to imagine that you are the witness to the exchange. In the large group, we will then discuss what our response could be based on these texts.

Questions: According to your text:

- 1) Should we rebuke someone who has committed a “sin”?
- 2) If yes, does it matter when or how the event took place?
- 3) If no, why not? How should we “feel” about that person?

In order to bridge the way language has been used over the centuries, please assume two things:

- 1) For the context of this talk and the rabbinic way of talking, an offensive remark is a sin.
- 2) How we feel refers not to a feeling but the action that is connected to that feeling.

1) Lev. 19:15

לֹא־תַעֲשׂוּ עוֹל בַּמִּשְׁפָּט לֹא־תִשָּׂא פְּנֵי־דָל וְלֹא תִהְדָּר פְּנֵי גָדוֹל בְּצַדֵּק תִּשְׁפֹּט עַמִּיתְךָ:

You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kin fairly.

2) Lev. 19:17

יִזְלֹתְשָׂנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכֵחַ תוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֵטְא:

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him.

3) Shabbat 54b

רב ורבי חנינא ורבי יוחנן ורב חביבא מתנו בכוליה דסדר מועד כל כי האי
זוגא חלופי רבי יוחנן ומעייל רבי יונתן כל מי שאפשר למחות לאנשי ביתו
ולא מיחה נתפס על אנשי ביתו באנשי עירו נתפס על אנשי עירו בכל
העולם כולו נתפס על כל העולם כולו

It was related that Rav, and Rabbi Hanina, and Rabbi Yohanan, and Rav Haviva taught the statement cited below....Whoever can stop the members of his household from committing a sin, but does not, is held responsible for the sins of his household. If he can stop the people of his city from sinning, but does not, he is held responsible for the sins of the people of his city. If he can stop the whole world from sinning, and does not, he is held responsible for the sins of the whole world.

4) Rashi commentary on Shavuot 30a

הוי דן את חברך לכף זכות - ולא בדין בעלי דינים הכתוב מדבר אלא ברואה חברו עושה דבר שאתה יכול להכריעו לצד עבירה ולצד זכות הכריעו לזכות ואל תחשדהו בעבירה:

Judge your fellow favorably-This does not refer to judging litigants in court. Rather, it refers to someone who observes another person doing an action that could be interpreted as either a wrongdoing or as a neutral act. You should not suspect him of a wrongdoing; rather assume he is innocent.

5) Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Sefer Maddah, De'ot 2

וְאָמְרוּ שְׁכָל הַכּוֹעֵס אִם חָכֵם הוּא חֲכָמְתוֹ מְסִתְּלֶקֶת מִמֶּנּוּ וְאִם נְבִיא הוּא נְבוּאָתוֹ מְסִתְּלֶקֶת מִמֶּנּוּ. וּבְעֲלֵי כַּעַס אֵין חַיִּיהֶם חַיִּים. לְפִיכָּךְ צִוּוּ לְהִתְרַחֵק מִן הַכַּעַס עַד שֶׁיִּנְהַיֵּג עֲצָמוֹ שֶׁלֹּא יִרְגִישׁ אֶפְלוּ לְדַבָּרִים הַמְּכַעֲסִים וְזוֹ הִיא הַדֶּרֶךְ הַטּוֹבָה. וְדֶרֶךְ הַצַּדִּיקִים הֵן עֲלוּבִין וְאֵינָן עוֹלָבִין שׁוֹמְעִים חֲרָפְתָם וְאֵינָם מְשִׁיבִין עוֹשִׂין מֵאַהֲבָה וּשְׂמֵחִים בְּיִסּוּרִים. וְעֲלִיהֶם הַכָּתוּב אוֹמֵר (שׁוֹפְטִים ה' לא) "וְאַהֲבִיו כְּצֵאת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בְּגִבְרָתוֹ":

They also said: "Whosoever yields to anger, if he be a wise man his wisdom leaves him, and if he be a prophet his prophecy leaves him." Verily the life of irritable persons is no life. They have, therefore, commanded to be afar from anger, so that one will train himself not to mind even the things which do cause irritation, for such is the good way. The conduct of the just is to take insults but not give insults, hear themselves flouted but make no reply, do their duty as a work of love, and bear affliction cheerfully. Concerning them the Verse says: "But may those that love Him be as the rising of the sun in his might" (Judg. 5.31).

6) Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Sefer Maddah, Hilchot De'ot 6

הלכה ז: המוכיח את חברו בין בדברים שבינו לבינו, בין בדברים שבינו לבין המקום, צריך להוכיחו בינו לבין עצמו, וידבר לו בנחת ובלשון רכה ויודיעו שאינו אומר לו אלא לטובתו להביאו לחיי העולם הבא, אם קיבל ממנו מוטב ואם לאו יוכיחו פעם שניה ושלישית, וכן תמיד חייב אדם להוכיחו עד שיכהו החוטא ויאמר לו איני שומע, וכל שאפשר בידו למחות ואינו מוחה הוא נתפש בעון אלו כיון שאפשר לו למחות בהם. הלכה ח: המוכיח את חברו תחלה לא ידבר לו קשות עד שיכלימו שנתנו ולא תשא עליו חטא, כך אמרו חכמים יכול אתה מוכיחו ופניו משתנות ת"ל ולא תשא עליו חטא, מכאן שאסור לאדם להכלים את ישראל וכל שכן ברבים... בין קטן בין גדול

7: One who rebukes another, whether for offenses against the one who rebukes him/herself or for sins against God, should administer the rebuke in private, speak to the offender gently and tenderly, and point out that the rebuke is offered for the wrongdoer's own good, to secure for the other a life in the World to Come. If the person accepts the rebuke, well and good. If not, the person should be rebuked a second, and third time. And so one is bound to continue the admonitions, until the sinner assaults the admonisher and says, "I refuse to listen." Whoever is in a position to prevent wrongdoing and does not do so is responsible for the iniquity of all the wrongdoers whom that person might have restrained. 8: One who rebukes his fellow, the first time he must not speak harshly and humiliate him, as it is said: "Do not bear guilt because of him". Thus said our Sages: "Can it be that you rebuke him until his face becomes white?" Thus it says "Do not bear guilt because of him." From here we learn that no person may humiliate any Jew, even more so in public...whether of low or high social status...

7) Cited in Love your neighbor Zelig Pliskin Simcha Zissel Ziv a 19th century Eastern European sage

Very often a teacher will become angry at a student who is rebuked three or four times and still does not listen. Before losing patience, the teacher should ask him if he always corrects his own shortcomings by the third or fourth reminder.

Micro-aggression scenario that happened at CJC by a CJC member against another CJC member. The names have been changed to protect the dignity of our congregants.

After a Shabbat morning service Rosa was asked if she was a U.S. citizens by Ploni. Rosa replied “I am a US citizen by birth.” Ploni responded “Oh, I noticed your accent and thought you were not American. Are you Jewish or did you convert?”