

EPA Winter Convention 2004
Conservative Judaism: Tradition and Change

Class 1 topic: G-d

Pre-class Preparation: have sets of texts ready for exercise #1
Have four corners texts already hanging on the wall

I. Introduction:

Use the following exercise as your class ice breaker.

- A. Go around the room and have each person say their name and give a description of 'love'. Any aspect of the description is acceptable (physical, emotional -- all of them are correct).
- B. Go around the room again and this time ask the students to describe G-d. Examples may include:

Philosophical answers

all powerful (all is fate)
controls everything
created the world and walked away
speaks directly to people
made man g-d's partner in keeping the world
made man g-d's partner in completing the world
sets everything in motion
all knowing
all seeing
always listening
acts on behalf of man
a silent partner
g-d left a little piece of g-dself in every person
g-d breathes life into every human being when they are born

Physical answers

strong
has every color eyes
is male and female
an old man
sad
lonely
a man
a woman
both man and woman

Debrief: Was that hard, describing G-d?
What made it hard?

- C. Explain: What do you call physical descriptions of words that describe g-d?
A: Anthropomorphism.

Taking a step back

D. Lets discuss this issue.

Do we really believe that G-d has a right hand and left hand?
Why do we use these descriptions?

Is there something wrong with using these kinds of words?
 Is it hard to imaging G-d as violent, angry and at the same time a king and parent figure?
 Is there an alternative in prayer, Torah or our daily lives?

Teacher's note:

We use anthropomorphisms because that is all we know. We know physical, we don't understand, nor do we have the words to describe that which we can't analyze with our 5 senses. The concern is that by using anthropomorphisms, we are limiting G-d by giving G-d physical attributes. We are setting boundaries for G-d.

The second issue is that by using anthropomorphisms, we are turning G-d into a human and worshipping a human - - that is Avodah Zarah, idol worship.

As Kevin Smith put it in Dogma, "Human beings have not the oral nor psychological capacity to withstand the awesome voice of G-d. If you did that, your head would explode and your heart would cave in your chest. We went through 5 Adams before we learned that."

E. This is a group effort.

Lay out all the texts on the table in front of the class.

Ask them to divide up the texts into categories of descriptions of G-d.

Use the one-word descriptions as headings.

If possible, there will be magnets attached to the headings – put them up the dry board.

Have them read the pieces out loud and discuss which pile it belongs to.

Exodus 15 (Song of the Sea) :

I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously;

Horse and driver he has hurtled into the sea.

G-d, Man of War – Lord is His name!

Pharaoh's chariots and his army

He has cast into the sea;

And the pick of his officers

Are drowned in the sea of reeds.

Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power,

Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the foe!

In your great triumph You break Your opponents;

You send forth Your fury, it consumes them like straw...

You put out Your right hand,

The earth swallowed them.

The people hear and tremble;

Agony grips the dwellers of Philistia.

Now are the clans of Edom dismayed;

The tribes of Moab – trembling grips them;

All the dwellers in Canaan are agast.

Terror and dread descend upon them;

Through the might of Your right arm they are still as stone...

Exodus 20

I the Lord your G-d am an impassioned G-d, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me. But showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep my commandments.

Exodus 34:5

The Lord came down in a cloud; He stood with him there... Moses proclaimed G-d's name "The Lord, the Lord! A G-d compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; tey He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations ..."

Numbers 6:23 – 26

The Lord bless you and protect you! The Lord deal kindly and gracious with you! The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!

Numbers 11:1 – 2

The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord. The Lord heard and was incensed: a fire of the Lord broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down.

Deuteronomy 1:29 – 33

Have no dread of fear of them (the enemy). None other than the Lord your G-d, who goes before you, will fight for you, just as He did for you in Egypt before your very eyes. And in the wilderness, where you saw hoe the Lord your G-d carried you, as man carries his son, all the way that you traveled until you came to this place.

Deuteronomy 26:19

And that He will set you, in fame and renown and glory, high above all the nations that He has made; and that you shall be, as He promised, a holy people to the Lord your G-d.

Deuteronomy 28:15 – 20

But if you do not obey the Lord your G-d to observe faithfully all His commandments and laws which I enjoin upon you this day, all these curses shall come upon you and take effect:

- cursed shall you be in the city and cursed shall you be in the country
- cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl
- cursed shall be the issue of your womb and the produce of your soil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock
- cursed shall you be in your comings and cursed shall you be in your goings.

Deuteronomy 30:3 – 5

Then the Lord your G-d will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. He will bring you together again from all the peoples where the Lord your G-d has scattered you. And the Lord your G-d will bring you to the land that your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it, and He will make you more prosperous and more numerous than your fathers.

Samuel 1 2:2 – 11

There is no holy one like the Lord,
Truly, there is none besides You;
There is no rock like our G-d.

Talk no more with lofty pride,
Let no arrogance cross your lips!
For the Lord is an all-knowing G-d;
By Him actions are measured.

The Lord deals death and gives life,
Casts down and rises up.
The Lord makes poor and rich;
He raises the poor from the dust,
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's;
He has set the world upon them.
He guards the steps of His faithful,
But the wicked perish in the darkness-

The foes of the Lord shall be shattered;
He will thunder against them in the heavens,
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth.
H will give power to His king,
And triumph to His anointed one.

Psalm 2:11-12

Serve the Lord in awe;
Tremble with fright,
Pay homage in good faith,
Lest He be angered, and your way be doomed
In the mere flash of His anger.
Happy are all who take refuge in Him.

Psalm 3:4 – 9

But You , O Lord, are a shield about me,
My glory, He who holds my head high.
I cry aloud to the Lord,
And He answers me from His holy mountain.
I lie down and sleep and wake again,
For the Lord sustains me.
I have no fear of the myriad forces

Arrayed against me on every side.

Psalm 6:2 – 6

O Lord, do not punish me in anger,
 Do not chastise me in fury.
 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I languish;
 Heal me, O Lord, for my bones shake with terror.
 My whole being is stricken with terror,
 While You, Lord – O how long!
 O Lord, turn! Rescue me!
 Deliver me as befits Your faithfulness.
 For there is no praise of You among the dead;

Isaiah 1:18 – 20

“Come let us reach an understanding,” says the Lord.
 Be your sins like crimson (deep red),
 They can turn snow-white;
 If, the, you agree and give heed,
 You will eat the good things of the earth;
 But if you refuse and disobey,
 You will be devoured by the sword.
 For it was the Lord who spoke.

Isaiah 1:1 – 4

And G-d said through the prophet Isaiah,
 “I reared children and brought them up –
 and they have rebelled against Me!
 An ox knows its owner,
 A donkey, its master’s shed:
 Israel does not know,
 My people takes no thought.!

When completed, discuss with them what they felt about the descriptions. Go from one label to another. What does it feel like to have so many descriptions of G-d as a warrior, angry, vengeful, king, lord and parent figure? Is it hard to read about G-d as hot – tempered?

II. G-d and the Movements (Four corners game)

- A) Around the room are four statements.
- B) Read each and stand by the one you most strongly agree with.
- C) Pick a leader to speak for the group as to why they chose to stand there.

1) Orthodox

G-d is watching everything. G-d sees the laws we keep and the ones we break. We must adhere as strictly to the law as possible in order to not anger G-d. The more precepts you keep, closer you are to the Laws, the closer you are to G-d.

2) Reform

I find G-d through universal values such as treating others as I wish to be treated. G-d really commands us only to be ethical people, so behaving to that goal is where G-d is.

3) Conservative

We are aware of G-d through modern miracles and moments of beauty. Each of us finds it in different ways. What makes us unique is our ability to question, all the while maintaining a connection to the tradition.

4) Reconstructionist

We decide what connects us to G-d. Israeli dancing makes me feel close to G-d, not Kashrut and not prayer.

D) Speaker from each group explain to the class why they chose to stand there.

E) Turn the papers over.

F) Is anyone surprised by the sect of Judaism written on the back? Why?

G) Now that you know what sect you stand by, would you change where you stand?

III. Conclusion

1. What makes it so hard to talk about G-d? [*My favorite answer is because we gave up 'G-d Talk' to the Christians. Now when we talk about we sound like church people!*]
2. Does talking about G-d make it harder or easier?
3. Does it sound like "church talk"?
4. Does looking at the different sects definitions of G-d make it clearer or not?
5. What have you come away from this class with?

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Class 2 topic: Torah and Halachah

Pre Class Preparation: Exercise 1 - Velcro board, statements of belief with Velcro on back, name of sect with Velcro on back
Exercise 2 - 4 conservative quotes on wall (tape) or held by students
Traif Dinner Menu
Exercise 3 – index cards with role play

I. Introduction

1. Read out loud to the class: (Pirke Avot 1:1)
(You'll have a piece of paper with the quote so the kids can see it while you read it.)

“Moshe received the Torah from G-d at Sinai.
He (Moses) transmitted it to Joshua,
Joshua to the Elders,
the Elders to the Prophets,
The Prophets to the members of the Great Assembly.”

2. Who have we received the Torah from?
3. Who commands us to follow the rules in the Torah?

II. What is Torah?

A. Match Game:

Using the set of Velcro pieces you will find one set with views of Torah and one set with names of the different movements. Have the students match up the movement with their belief of the power of Torah.

While they are doing this, ask them why they are choosing the sect to match the statement. What does the statement mean? What does it / Does it imply as the conditions of belief?

Norman Lamm, former president of Yeshiva University

- 1) “... Every word of the Torah, and of course, every commandment, has it's source in G-d; but the meaning of the revealed word or commandment is given in the oral tradition, the *Torah she-be al peh* (*Mishnah and Talmud*) alone.” Moreover the texts of the Bible and Talmud that we have in hand must be understood as the exact word of G-d because if a human being wrote down G-d's word, the record of it that we have may be in error.

Translation: The Torah, Mishna and Talmud were given at Sinai. Any Midrash presented is something that was already taught at Sinai but forgotten until now. The laws of the Torah were

given directly from G-d, making them unbreakable. The Talmud was G-d's explanation of the laws and therefore is given as much power, if not more than the Torah.

'Orthodoxy has clung fast to the principle of authority, but has in our own and recent generations rejected the right to any but minor interpretations.' (*Our Ancestors to Our Descendants*, 59)

Seymour Siegel, professor of theology at the Jewish Theological Seminary

- 2) "The record of this divine-human encounter (Sinai) is contained in the Torah. The Torah (and the rest of the sacred literature of the Jews) is the result of revelation. It is the human writing – down of the divine word. Therefore, the Bible is not infallible. It does not reflect scientific truth; and it may reflect historical inaccuracies."

Translation: The Torah is the record of our history but written by man. Therefore, though divinely inspired and transmitted by G-d, it is left to us to interpret.

As Solomon Schechter put it, "we must interpret for the times, remaining steeped in tradition"

Rabbi Samuel Schulman, author of 'The Guiding Principles' (Reform)

- 3) "... the essence of Judaism is morality and belief in G-d, a combination demonstrated most clearly in the literature of the Prophets. The legal developments during the talmudic period (Mishna, Talmud, Shulchan Aruch) and Middle Ages were temporary measures designed for those periods only; they have no authority today, when Jews no longer need laws to enable them to survive under governments hostile to Jews. ... Many of the rituals of Judaism should be disbanded because they hinder the integration of Jews into modern society.

Translation: G-d revealed G-dself through universal values. These are found in the Torah. The laws were put in place in order to live as Jews in hostile countries. That time is past. Reform Judaism focuses on striving for universal justice, peace, ethical, personal and social responsibilities; those are our connection to G-d.

Our Ancestors to Our Descendants (Pages 153 – 157), Pittsburgh Platform of 2001

Ira Eisenstein, President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

- 4) Despite what the Torah claims for itself – and what some people still claim for it – I believe that it is a human document, reflecting the attempt of its authors to account for the history of the Jewish people, and for moral and ethical insights which its geniuses acquired during the course of that history.

The Torah is holy not because it is the last word, but because it is the first self-conscious word of Judaism, which reveals the direction of its moral thrust. The holiness of Torah does not require that its contents be held as infallible or immutable ... (Harold Shulweis)

Translation: Torah is only the beginning. We decide for ourselves what practices we follow and what we don't.

Our Ancestors to Our Descendents (149 – 152)

B. Explanation of Match Game

Ask around the room:

How does one's belief in G-d impact their view of the role of Torah?

Their actions?

Why is the Orthodox description different than that of Reform?

Is Conservative Judaism really the middle road?

When they are done, go around the room and ask them to tell you which description they feel most strongly about and why.

C. Exercise #2: The spectrum of the movement

Place 4 pieces of paper (with the quotes listed below) along the wall.

Either :

- A) Ask them to identify from which sect each statement is from (they are all conservative)
Line them up on the wall.
Stand where you feel most connected.

Or

- B) Ask them to put the statements in the order of the spectrum of the Conservative Movement the statements lie.

Or

- C) Read over each statement together as a class and discuss what the implications of each statement are. Those words in bold are discussions in themselves.

Statement 1: (Conservative I – Rabbi Roth style response)

From Sinai on, Jewish law and theology are to be identified with the ways in which the rabbis of each generation interpreted and applied the laws of the Torah. Hence, the authority of Jewish law is based upon the fact that it is G-d's will, as stated first in the Torah and then by rabbis of each generation. Rabbis are **authorized to modify the law for their time, but only with extreme caution.**

Questions if doing part C:

- How can you modify cautiously? [*Few changes over the years*]
-

Statement 2: (Conservative II – Ben Zion Bokser – direct quote)

Human beings wrote the Torah at various times and places. These people were **divinely inspired** and therefore, the words carry the **insight and authority** of G-d.

Jewish laws may be changed for two reasons. Since the Torah was divinely inspired and human articulation, we must distinguish between the divine and human elements in the Tradition and change the latter when circumstances require it.

... divine inspiration continues on in the form of new interpretations of the Torah in each generation.

Questions if doing part C:

- what does divinely inspired mean? [*it means g-d inspired but written by man*]
- Insight and authority – How far does that authority go? Should I be worried about G-d punishing me? [*G-d does not punish in that way. Authority goes as far as you want it to*]
- How do you distinguish between human and divine elements? [*a question for the rabbis*]
- What are examples of circumstances that would require changing laws? [*creation of electricity*]

Statement 3: (Conservative III – Louis Jacobs – direct quote)

For both G-d and the Jewish community command a Jew to act in accordance with Jewish law as it is interpreted in each generation, and the Jew renews his own personal contact with both in so acting.

Since the Torah was written by human beings, if we want to learn about the origins and meaning of the Bible, we must use the techniques of biblical scholarship as thoroughly and honestly as we can.

Because the Bible is the **HUMAN** recording of the encounter between G-d and man during times past, the specific ideas and laws contained therein reflect the practices, values, and attitudes of those times. They may no longer be **adequate expressions of our own understanding** of what G-d demands of us. We, in our day have not only the right, but the responsibility to make appropriate changes in the Tradition **that has come down to us** so that it will reflect G-d's will as accurately as possible and accomplish it as effectively as possible in the contemporary world.

Clarifications:

- Adequate understandings – refers to the rules that we once lived by as standard (laws of sacrifices, laws regarding the temple, requirements for the festival days when going to Jerusalem)
- The Tradition that came down to us – the one that we inherited from generations past

Questions if doing part C:

- What is considered “effective” when altering Tradition?
- Examples of things that Tradition had to learn to adapt to? [Electricity, cars, buildings more than one story high, financials surrounding a synagogue, keeping Kosher, living outside of the Land of Israel]

Questions if doing part A , B or C:

What questions do these texts raise?

What answers are the texts trying to provide for us?

What do all of these texts have in common?

What makes them all Conservative answers?

How is that possible?

What does it tell you about the movement?

Does it explain why the movement had such a problem defining itself?

III. Where did we come from? A quick history lesson

Ask: Which came first, Orthodoxy or Reform Judaism? [*Orthodoxy*]

Explanation: When the people were expelled from the land of Israel, Judaism had to evolve. Their Judaism was defined by animal sacrifice. In that time, the rabbis became the leaders of the Jewish people. They kept strict rules and thus was born Orthodoxy.

Why do you think Reform Judaism came into being?

Explanation: The Enlightenment in Germany. The Jews thought that if they dropped all the laws that made them different from their goyish neighbors, then they would gain the rights of regular citizens and not be considered second-class citizens. (It didn't work).

The first immigration of Jews from Europe were all the Enlightened Jews.

These Enlightened Jews had a meal one evening to discuss the direction of the Reform movement and create a platform of belief.

Below is the menu from that dinner, now known as the “treif” dinner:

(A student can volunteer to read it)

MENU:

Appetizers:

Little Neck Clams

Soup

Fish
 Beef with mushrooms
 Soft Shell crabs

Main course:
 Sweet bread
 Viennise Chicken
 Potato pie
 Frogs' legs in Cream sauce
 Pigeons
 Salad

Hors D'Oeuvres:
 Holland Sardines
 (I can't translate the rest from French)

Dessert:
 Candies
 Assorted and Ornamented Cakes
 Various Cheese
 Various fruits
 Black coffee
 Cognac

Questions:
 Do you find anything wrong with this list?

This is where Conservative Judaism was born – from Reform Judaism.

And where does Reconstructionist Judaism stem from? [US]
 Mordechi Kaplan taught at JTS in the school of education (now Davidson School) and in the Rabbinical School. He left when his theological views no longer matched those of the Conservative movement. As he said, "I won't say it if I don't believe it." This didn't occur until 1962, when he left the seminary. He taught there for 53 years, all the while writing a Reconstructionist Siddur and theology. [Conservative Judaism: The New Century]

V. You be the Committee For Law and Standards (Rabbis that make Conservative Halachic decisions):

Case: You don't live close enough to your shul to walk. You ask the rabbi if it's ok for you to drive.

How do you decide? What do you decide?
 Each person will be handed role playing cards.
 You must argue out the side you are assigned.

Right wing (Rabbi J. Roth)

- No. Driving is not in the spirit of Shabbat and starting the car is using a spark plug. That is breaking the law against lighting fires on Shabbat.

Right/Center (Rabbi M. Rabinowitz)

- No, if you are not within walking distance. Walking distance is defined by 1 mile.

Center/Right (Rabbi J. Hauptman)

- Yes. Because electricity is not the same as fire but it's not in the spirit of Shabbat.

Center (Rabbi E. Diamond)

- No. It's not in the spirit of Shabbat.
- Yes. Drive to the Shul and back, nothing more.

Center (Rabbi Y. Creditor)

- Yes. It is better to be with the community on Shabbat than stay home. Staying home is not in the spirit of Shabbat.

Left (Rabbi N. Gillman)

- You decide how to keep the laws of Shabbat.

Left (Rabbi M. Kaplan)

- It depends on you. If going to Shul on Shabbat brings you closer to G-d, then drive to Shul. If going to Shul on Shabbat does nothing for you, then don't drive.

After everyone has argued their side, ask them to argue their personal view.
Allow 8 minutes for discussion.

Read the Conservative T'shuvah:

"It is unrealistic to depend on travel for reaching a synagogue on the Sabbath. For many will be occasions when travel will not be available, surely not for our young children and then even the willingness to travel will not overcome the barrier of distance.

As a normal arrangement a person who cares about religious life must endeavor to live accessibly close to a synagogue, and accessibly close means within walking distance.

Given the choice between travel on the Sabbath or the total denial of the opportunities of worship on Sabbaths and festivals, we would regard traveling as the less objectionable alternative. The decision rests on subjective factors over which the individual involved alone is sovereign. If he should decide that private prayer at home offers him no adequate religious experience and that he has no alternative but to travel, the rabbi must assure him of his sympathetic understanding of the facts which have led him in this direction.

Question: What is the tone of the piece?

What is the answer they give?

How does that equate to our daily lives?

What do you think the answers to this question would be from an Orthodox perspective? A Reform perspective?

How do you feel about Conservative Judaism taking a stand on something like this? Is it right?

Would you do you follow their ruling?

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Class 3 Topic: Tefillah

Pre Class Preparation: text packets

Stickers to put people into their second classes

Pieces of paper so teachers show what number or letter

Yonina divide up the kids into groups. (they will be handed pieces of papers with letters and numbers on it)

Text packets will be handed out to teachers.

Yonina:

We are studying the changes in the Siddur made by the Conservative movement.

We will find that the changes were made in order to reflect the conservative theology, which we have been studying all weekend.

Group 1: Changes in Birchot HaShachar

Art Scroll (AS): page 18

Siddur Sim Shalom (SS): page 10

AS - Men say: say: Loh Asani Isha (That G-d didn't make me a woman)

- Women say: She Asani Kirtzono (that G-d made me according to His will)

Changed to =>

SS - Everyone says: She Asani BeTzalmo (That G-d made me in His image)

Group 2: Additions to the Amidah (Emahot)

Art Scroll: 98

Siddur Sim Shalom: p/ 135 A

AS - Elohey Avraham, Itzchak ve Yaakov (G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob)

SS - Elohey Sara, Rivkah, Rahel ve Leyah 9G-d of Sarah, Rebeccah, Rachel and Leah

AS - Magel Avraham (shield of Abraham)

SS - Ufoked Sarah (guardian of Sarah)

Group 3: Quotes from the Talmud rather than reading the Korbanot

Art Scroll: p30 – 36

Sim Shalom: P16 – 18

AS –

Quotes from Torah:

The Laver

Taking of the Ashes

Tamid

SS -

Rabbinic texts of lovingkindness

(Avot De'Rabbi Natan)

Sukkah 49b

deeds of lovingkindness, charity

Incense be gracious and compassionate
 Mishnas regarding offerings:
 Zevachim Chapter 5 –
 Mishna 1 – 8
 Sifra

Group 4: Yehi Ratzon

Art Scroll: 52

Sim Shalom: 18

AS – May it be your will, Hashem, our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, that the Holy Temple be rebuilt, speedily in our days, and grant us our share in Your Torah, and may we serve You there with reverence as in days of old and in our former years.

SS – May it be your will, lord our G-d and G-d of our ancestors, to grant our portion in Your Torah. May we be disciples of Aaron the Kohen, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving our fellow creatures and drawing them near to the Torah.

Group 5: Addition of Tefillah L'Midinah (Kitzur versus shalem) / Tefillah L'Shalom

Art Scroll: x

Sim Shalom: 416, 416

Group 6: Birkat Ha Mazon

Art Scroll: 194

Siddur Slim Shalom: 343

AS – has none of the extra blessings for the country, Jews everywhere ...

SS – includes all of that

Both are missing the prayer for the Israel Defense Force (Tzahal)

Each group is studying one set of texts.

When redistributed for jigsaw, the key is that there is one 'expert' from each text source.

Questions for each group:

1. What is the difference between the two texts
2. What does it mean (what do the changes imply?)
3. Are these bad or good changes?
4. Why do you think the people who edited the Siddur did this change?

Jigsaw the groups:

Hand out to each of your students a sticker with a number on it.

When Yonina tells everyone to go to their new number, lift up your number sign so everyone knows where to go. It will be chaos for a few minutes but then things will settle down. You

should have one expert from each text source in your new group. If something goes wrong and you are missing a text expert, have the new group look at it and discuss it.

1. Have each student teach their group about their text.
2. Which change do you feel most strongly towards (agree with the most?)

Question: What do all these changes have to do with the Conservative movement?

Why make the changes?

Why? Who cares?

Who is paying attention?

What do you see as the next evolution of prayer?

Teacher note:

We care – it matters because Tefillah must reflect our interests and reflects changes in the Jewish community.

Everyone come back together.

Conclusion:

Yonina facilitate discussion:

This whole weekend, we have spent talking about Conservative Judaism. We have talked about it's stances regarding G-d, Torah and now prayer. We have wrestled with the spectrum that Conservative Judaism fills and why it was created.

What have you learned? Majority of you define yourselves as conservative Jews; how did this weekend make you feel? What was like when you had to defend or argue against what you thought you believed? Did this weekend make you think?

