

APPENDIX I

Abi's tips for leading a healthy argument with your family

If you're like my family, at the occasional family dinner—perhaps a Friday night or Shabbat meal—your table conversation goes something like this:

“How was school today?” I ask.

“Okay,” Nina, my fourteen-year-old, answers.

“I’ll tell you how school was,” says my six-year-old, Dori. “My bum.”

“Mom, did you sign the permission form already? You keep forgetting!” exclaims ten-year-old Annaelle.

And, twelve-year-old Yishai just sits with his nose in a book, not even looking up to take a bite of food.

After one too many meals with some version of this conversation, I desperately hope for something more stimulating—not just for the kids, but for me and my husband as well. So, on some occasions I’ve started to take out a story and read it aloud to try and shake things up. I’ve learned a lot from these impromptu story and argument sessions. Below are a few pointers to help make your conversations more meaningful, fun, and engaging.

1. Picking a story.

You might want to read ahead, so as to choose a story that's appropriate for your kids' ages. If you've got younger kids (below age ten), the "warm-up" stories are more accessible to them. Also, the allegorical stories work well, though they might not be able to participate as much in the conversation once you move to the deeper meaning of the story. If you're a family that hasn't discussed Israel much before, you might want to start with a "warm-up" story, even if you have older kids.

2. The setting.

When's the right time and place to do this? As noted above, I like the dinner table. We're all at the table anyway and often struggling to converse. But some families might enjoy doing this as a more planned activity. If you're planning a trip to Israel, for example, you may decide to engage with several of these stories, as part of your pre-trip education process. In either case, make sure you're all comfortable and can see one another. It's not a bad idea to have some snacks ready to munch on. Also, generally, I find the conversations work best after a lazy day, when we haven't had much to do or say to one another. It's as though the passions have been stored up and need to be put to good use.

3. Length of time needed.

This is really dependent on your family. Younger kids probably won't last more than ten to fifteen minutes. Older kids can usually stick to one story for about twenty minutes. And sometimes it's best to plan for two stories. Sometimes one story is of greater interest than another, and the second story may result in a better conversation than the first.

4. Facilitation.

A question we often ask ourselves is, how active a facilitator should I be? If you've got more vocal kids, sometimes they want to speak at once and can get frustrated when they can't respond right away. This generally takes some active facilitation. In my family with four kids, I sometimes need to list who will speak when, often allowing the younger kids, who find it harder to wait, to speak first. If you've got quiet kids, sometimes you may need to actively ask them an open-ended question, or prod them with a couple of additional ideas to get them talking. I recommend looking at the background page that goes with each story, and using some of the questions listed to get the conversation going. Whatever kind of family you've got, most important is that you allow the kids—and the adults—to engage with the idea. Don't fear a disagreement. In fact, if I see that most of us are agreeing, I try to take the opposing side, in an effort to help my kids see that there are other ways of seeing the world.

5. Screens & Technology.

Put them all aside. Ask everyone in the family, parents included, to turn off or remove all cell phones and screens from the room. Sure, you may feel that you can google some information that will help you with the conversation, but leave that for another time. All the information you need for a good conversation can be found in the “background” pages of each story. Googling even just one fact will actually end up as a distraction from having an in-depth conversation. So, we recommend putting it all aside. And, if you do have some additional information you're looking for, save it for later—and use the opportunity to have a follow-up conversation with your family another time.

Finally . . .

Perhaps the hardest part of a family conversation is that, as parents, most of us want our children to share the same views that we hold. This is not a bad thing in and of itself. But for the sake of these stories, see if you can genuinely let your kids try on different opinions. Consider helping them examine different sides—even ones with which you personally disagree. Try asking questions rather than giving answers. Try just putting out another piece of information that might challenge an idea. In the long run, we believe this will not only make them more critical thinkers, it will also make them more compassionate and able to listen to others.