

Machloket L'shem Shamayim: Arguing for the Sake of Heaven

This year I lost a friend. I had been introduced to Jay (not his real name) by a fellow hospital chaplain when Jay had requested a visit from the rabbi. I remember walking into his room and feeling as though I had known this man my whole life. His infectious smile, his humor, his yiddish, all brought a sense of comfort to me. We got along famously, chatting about Bellingham, theology and the great Jewish delis.

Jay had left Judaism a long time ago. Religion was not his cup of tea. He identified as an ardent “cultural Jew” and I respected this about him. Jay was on his own Jewish and life journey and I made it clear that I was there to support him.

Over the next year I visited him regularly and enjoyed several calls that lasted much longer than I had always anticipated. Jay was so interested in my family and I was entertained by stories of his life in New York decades ago. We never discussed politics. It never came up.

Late last year I tried to schedule a time to visit Jay and his wife at home. He was in and out of cancer treatments, so nailing down a good time to see him was always a challenge. Many times Jay was just too exhausted or spontaneous doctor appointments broke our dates.

The election last year came and went and I never heard from him despite my many attempts to connect. Winter turned into spring and still, nothing. Jay had gone silent. I wondered if the cancer had completely debilitated him. If he was close to death I needed Jay and his wife to know that I was present for them.

And then Jay broke the months of silence with an email.

He was not actively dying. He hadn't gone on an extended vacation. He *chose* to keep his distance. In his message, Jay expressed how upset he was that a rabbi would publicly state in a letter how people like him, who

supported the candidate he voted for, were uneducated and bad Jews. He had officially severed our relationship.

I was stunned.

After gathering myself and re-reading his message, I reached out to no avail. I thought, maybe we can sit down and talk about this. I was so surprised. I had never done what he accused me of. I would never shame anyone for believing whatever they want to believe.

I crafted a respectful reply. I wanted Jay to know that I was confused, but nevertheless, still his friend and champion. I told him that I celebrated his difference of opinion, even though I wasn't sure why he even thought that in the first place. We had never discussed politics and no community letter that I had sent following the election shamed supporters of the newly elected president. I was dumbfounded.

I suspect some of us here have broken relationships with friends or even family members since November. Probably many more of us have "unfriended" people on Facebook for comments we find inaccurate, ignorant or just plain offensive.

We are currently living in troubling times where communicating with one another seems to be getting more and more of a challenge. It's hard to even be in the same room with someone we know holds contrary views from our own. It's gotten that bad.

Add to the mix social media, where anyone has the ability to tell everyone in the world what they think and feel in real time. If you want to be criticized, just post or tweet a deeply held belief. In this politically charged environment, it does not seem that this ease with which to share our perspective on contentious issues has helped create more civil discourse. On the contrary, statistics show it might be worse.

In last year's nonpartisan Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey, titled, Family, Politics and the Holidays, "13% of the public say they blocked, unfriended, or stopped following someone on social media because of what they posted about politics." In a Reuters poll conducted be-

tween December 27 to January 18, sixteen-percent said they have stopped talking to a family member or friends because of the election and their relatives' personal politics.

Imagine that: completely cutting off ties with loved ones simply because we don't share the same perspective on how the country ought to be run.

How many of us have felt, at one time or another, that we hold high moral beliefs and the other side does not? As you can imagine, this mindset will take a conversation nowhere. When one person talks, the other immediately puts their fingers in their ears and the eyes begin to roll. The blood begins to boil. This is the atmosphere we have created.

So how do we overcome this ever-increasing chasm that divides us from those we care about and those in our communities? How are we to speak with one another without burning bridges?

Dr. Geoffrey Grief, professor at the University of Maryland and author of *Buddy System: Understanding Male Friendships*, writes, "Do you want to engage in a sincere discussion with the person whose views you are unlikely to change? If so, active listening wherein you and he are not defensive and take an inquiring stance to learn each other's thinking is more productive than arguing and holding on to assumptions about each other that may not be true."¹

This sounds so straightforward, almost elementary. Of course, don't get defensive. Don't make too many assumptions. We all know this is the solution, but is it possible to get to this place in our current environment? What about our Jewish tradition? Perhaps we can learn something from thousands of years of arguing Jews.

Hillel and Shammai are the Jewish exemplars for civil discourse and conflict. These rabbis, living 2000 years ago argued fiercely over everything imaginable, from how to light a *chanukiah* to how to hang a mezuzah on

¹ Greif, Geoffrey. "Losing Friends and Family Over the Election?" *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 18 Oct. 2016, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/buddy-system/201610/losing-friends-and-family-over-the-election.

the doorpost of one's home. Despite their countless heated debates, these opposing rabbis maintained a peaceful relationship with one another. They even celebrated when their relatives married into the family of the other. The Talmud tells us this in order to teach that Hillel and Shammai "showed love and friendship towards one another, thus putting into practice the scriptural text, 'Love truth and peace.' (Zech. 8:16)."²

According to the rabbis, Hillel and Shammai engaged in a form of debate called, *machloket l'shem shamayim*, arguments for the sake of heaven. This type of debate necessitates deep respect for other human beings, especially for those with viewpoints opposed to our own.

In Pirke Avot we are taught, *kol machloket sh'hee l'shem shamayim, sufah l'hitkayem...*, "Any dispute that is for the sake of heaven will have a constructive outcome (i.e. it will endure). But one that is not for the sake of heaven will not endure. What sort of dispute was for the sake of heaven? The dispute between Hillel and Shammai. And which was not for the sake of heaven? The dispute of Korach and his entire company."³

What are the rabbis talking about? When people argue in order to exert control or to triumph over each other, the argument will not have any constructive outcome. Only when there is a common goal shared by both parties can a dispute produce positive effects. With respect to Hillel and Shammai, they were not concerned with triumph but with a sincere search for the true understanding of Torah. They challenged and questioned one another, but more importantly, they learned from one another. There was little judgment.

Why is Korach portrayed as one who does not engage in *machloket l'shem shamayim*? He incited violence by encouraging the Israelites to rebel against Moses and Aaron in order to overthrow them as leaders. Korach took advantage of the national unrest in the desert to foment rebellion. He posed as a champion of the people and tried to discredit Moses' leadership

² BT Yevamot 14b

³ Pirke Avot 5:20

by accusing him of exerting too much power over the people. This rebellion, according to our sages was not for the sake of heaven.

In the Mishnah⁴ there is a story which recounts how both Hillel and Shammai ultimately retracted their opinions on a hotly disputed case in favor of a third opinion. We can glean from this account that to stubbornly adhere to our viewpoint at the cost of losing a friendship is not the Jewish way. Being receptive to other opinions, even when we know them to be inaccurate, is the essential component of *machloket l'shem shamayim*.

Look, it's not always so easy. Sometime we just can't accept what another person says. Even Hillel and Shammai had their less amicable moments. There is a terrifying story in the Jerusalem Talmud when students of Beit Shammai brought weapons into the beit midrash and actually killed their fellow Torah scholars from Beit Hillel who disagreed with them, in order to make sure that the majority vote went according to Beit Shammai.⁵ You might say they overreacted!

Another story tells of a dispute between the two schools that ended tragically as well. On the 9th of Adar, one disagreement over 18 legal matters led, according to some sources, to the death of 3,000 students. The day was said to be as tragic as the day the golden calf was created. It was later declared a fast day.

In other words, it's not always so easy to disagree and remain cordial. Sometimes things get out of hand. That might be an understatement. But, what these stories teach us is that it's hard to always keep the peace when there is so much dissent. And even so with the best of our rabbis. It's one thing to understand *machloket l'shem shamayim* and it's another to practice it.

In acknowledgment of that frightening day a couple thousand years ago, modern Israeli law officially made each 9th of Adar a day to focus on mediation and other forms of alternative dispute resolution. Imagine if we set

⁴ Eduyyot 1:1–3

⁵ JT Shabbat 1:4

aside one day to heal the broken relationships in our lives that were caused by a dispute or misunderstanding.

My friends, we are all guilty of engaging in dialogue that is not for the sake of heaven. In the heat of the moment, it is near impossible to always carefully consider the opinions of others and to retract our positions as humbly as Hillel and Shammai. The Talmud teaches that even amongst the closest of relationships, such as a parent and child, or teacher and student, arguments may blow up and “they too become ‘enemies’ of each other.” However, it goes on to say that “they will not move from that spot (where they are arguing) until they come to love each other.”⁶ Disagreeing with one another and remaining close takes patience and hard work. We do not just walk away.

Judaism reminds us that even if we have disparate notions of politics or any other matter, that we still must find a way to come together, to pray, to study, to mourn and to celebrate. The stories of Hillel and Shammai illustrate the deep underpinnings of respect they had for one another. Are we able to look at those who hold polar opposite views from our own with respect? Can we speak with a sense of humility? Must we always be right?

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the URJ, wrote, “When we have these hard conversations in a constructive manner, we can liberate ourselves to grow and learn. We can discover a new kind of freedom, a new kind of religiosity that isn’t self-righteous or self-important, that doesn’t exclude the views of those who disagree, but includes and even seeks out the challenging arguments for the sake of heaven.”⁷

I never had the opportunity to converse with Jay about our differences. You see, Jay died not long after he wrote me that email. I regret not having the chance to sit down with him, as friends, as equals, and engage in a *machloket l’shem shamayim*. I wish I could visit with Jay and argue over

⁶ BT Kiddushin 30b

⁷ Jacobs, Rick. “How To Talk Politics at Your Family Seder Without Killing Each Other.” *The Forward*, Rachel Fishman Fedderson, 17 Apr. 2016, forward.com/opinion/338827/how-to-talk-politics-at-your-family-seder-without-killing-each-other/.

what really divided us: who has the better pastrami sandwich, Katz's or Nate n' Al's.

I know many of us in this room have not spoken to friends, family and even community members in a long time, all because of the political drama that is still unfolding. As we enter this New Year, let us remember that our opinions regarding politics, religion, Israel, you name it, are just a small fraction of our whole selves. We might think, in the moment, that someone's essence is wrapped up in what they believe regarding an issue, but we also know that not to be true. We are also our past experiences, our dreams, hopes, yearnings, losses, failures, achievements and so much more.

May we have the inner strength as Hillel and Shammai to learn from each other. To not be resistant to dialogue. To consider opposing views. To not walk away. And to know when to hold back. If we can muster the fortitude and patience to do this, then certainly our conversations will be for the sake of heaven.

Ken yehi ratzon. May this be God's will.