

Beyond Polarization: Judaism and our Public Culture
Valley Beit Midrash
October 28, 2020
Rabbi Irwin Kula

1. Every dispute which is for the sake of Heaven in the end will be permanently established. And every dispute which is not for the sake of Heaven in the end will not be permanently established. What is an example of a dispute for the sake of Heaven? The dispute between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. And what is an example of a dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and his band.

Pirkei Avot 5:21

2. R. Aha b. Hanina said: It is revealed and known before Him Who spoke and the world came into existence, that in the generation of R. Meir there was none equal to him; then why was not the halachah fixed in agreement with his views? Because his colleagues could not fathom the depths of his mind, for he would declare the ritually unclean to be clean and supply plausible proof, and the ritually clean to be unclean and also supply plausible proof.

One taught: His name was not R. Meir but R. Nehorai. Then why was he called 'R. Meir'? Because he enlightened the Sages in the halachah. His name in fact was not even Nehorai but R. Nehemiah or, as others say: R. Eleazar b. Arak. Then why was he called 'Nehorai'? Because he enlightened the Sages in the halachah.

Rabbi declared: The only reason why I am keener than my colleagues is that I saw the back of R. Meir, but had I had a front view of him I would have been keener still, for it is written in Scripture: But thine eyes shall see thy teacher.

R. Abbahu stated in the name of R. Johanan: R. Meir had a disciple Symmachus who, for every rule concerning ritual uncleanness, supplied forty-eight reasons in support of its uncleanness, and for every rule concerning ritual cleanness, forty-eight reasons in support of its cleanness...

R. Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel, the former asserting, 'The halachah is in agreement with our views' and the latter contending, 'The halachah is in agreement with our views'. Then a bat kol issued announcing, '[The utterances of] both are the words of the living God, but the halachah is in agreement with the rulings of Beth Hillel'. Since, however, both are the words of the living God' what was it that entitled Beth Hillel to have the halachah fixed in agreement with their rulings?

Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beth Shammai, and were even so [humble] as to teach the actions of Beth Shammai before theirs.....

Our Rabbis taught: For two and a half years were Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel in dispute, the former asserting that it were better for man not to have been created than to have been created, and the latter maintaining that it is better for man to have been created than not to have been created.

They finally took a vote and decided that it were better for man not to have been created than to have been created, but now that he has been created, let him investigate his past deeds or, as others say, let him examine his future actions.

Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 13b

3. Every dispute which is for the sake of Heaven in the end will be permanently established. And every dispute which is not for the sake of Heaven in the end will not be permanently established. What is an example of a dispute for the sake of Heaven? The dispute between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. And what is an example of a dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and his band.

Pirkei Avot 5:21

4. What is a machloket that is for the sake of Heaven?" For, in this world every machloket no matter what it is, the evil inclination tempts the person and says that it is for the sake of Heaven and for a great mitzvah to subdue traitors and to break the arm of the mighty and so forth The rule of the matter is there is no machloket that does not have within it the evil inclination who is tempting the person and saying that the whole intention is for the sake of Heaven, and G-d forbid to say on a particular machloket that it is not for the sake of Heaven. If so, how can a person know where the truth is, if it is truly for the sake of Heaven or not? With this a person can know. If the divided ones and the parties in conflict, other than regarding the matter over which they are disagreeing and opposing one another, are truly lovers in their heart and soul, this is the sign that their machloket is for the sake of Heaven. However, if they are enemies and are holding onto hatred for one another through their machloket, this is not for the sake of Heaven, and the Satan has settled himself within them. And this is the sign which the rabbis of the Mishnah passed on to us "which is the machloket which is for the sake of Heaven?" For in every machloket people say it is "for the sake of Heaven". They said "like the machloket of Shammai and Hillel" who loved one another and respected one another as lovers and friends. This is a sign that their disagreement is for the sake of Heaven. However, "like the machloket of Korach and his company", where they were holding onto enmity and hatred and almost stoned Moshe and the like, this is not for the sake of Heaven.

Sefer Ya'arot Devash ii, pp. 136

5. For the building is constructed from various parts, and the truth of the light of the world will be built from various dimensions, from various approaches, for these and those are the words of the living God...It is precisely the multiplicity of opinions which derive from variegated souls and backgrounds which enriches wisdom and brings about its enlargement. In the end all matters will be properly understood and it will be recognized that it was impossible for the structure of peace to be built without those trends which appeared to be in conflict.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Olat Raya, vol. I, p. 330

6. Each body of thought has its own logic and all ideas are tied to each other by a systematic relatedness...There is no such thing as a vain or useless thought...since each emanates from the same source in the divine wisdom. If there are thoughts that appear futile or empty, the futility and the emptiness are only in the outer garb in which these thoughts are enwrapped. But if we probe into all their inwardness, we shall find that they, too, offer us the sustenance of life....And as man grows in

the scale of perfection, he draws upon all ideas his own and those of others, for the kernel of abiding truth. He is made more perfect through them, and they through him.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Orot Ha-Kodesh, vol.1, p. 17

7. Though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or Never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, Chapter 2 (1859, England)

8. And it's at the very heart of my faith, because Judaism is a tradition all of whose canonical texts are anthologies of arguments. In the Bible, Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah and Job argue with God. The rabbinic literature is an almost endless series of Rabbi X says this and Rabbi Y says that, and when one rabbi had the chance of asking God who was right, God replied, they're both right. "How can they both be right?" asked the rabbi, to which God's apocryphal reply was: "You're also right." The rabbis called this, "argument for the sake of heaven."

Why does it matter? Because truth emerges from disagreement and debate. Because tolerance means making space for difference. Because justice involves Audi alteram partem, listening to the other side. And because, in Orwell's words, liberty means "the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

Truth Emerges from Disagreement and Debate, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

9. Our ideas about life often act as a protective coating. We "know" what life is like and so do not have to experience its myriad nuances. We sentence life to exile. Life doesn't change its way, we too often refuse what life offers. We deplete experience in different ways. We can be too realistic, one can be too fantastic, one can be scientific, one can be overly fanatical and zealous...rather than have a war between these different dimensions of experience, it's much more fruitful to keep open the possibility that each have a voice, that each have a say in the play of voices and to see what happens.

Irwin Kula



Clal - The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership
440 Park Avenue South, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10016

ikula@clal.org twitter: @irwinkula Facebook: Irwin Kula