

# **Machloket – Constructive Conflict for the Sake of Heaven: Jewish Tradition and Human Nature**

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Jewish tradition emphasizes *machloket* (disputes and strife) – as a fact of life, rather than as a problematic exception. Indeed, the process of *Machloket* is central for understanding sacred texts, as well as for response to a changing environment. These texts, from ancient to modern, refer to many instances of community strife covering a very wide range of issues. As a result, *Machloket*, in the form of constructive conflict, is viewed as a part of social, interpersonal and family relationships.

However, the tradition shows that what may start as a “constructive” conflict often leads to deep divisions within Jewish communities – *kehilot* and *minyanim* (prayer quorums) divided on the basis of disputes on doctrine, practice, and other issues. As is often the case, principled disputes on relatively minor issues escalate and become personal disputes, with the protagonists becoming bitter enemies. This type of “senseless hatred” (*sinat chinam*) is said to have led to the destruction of the Second Temple.

The distinction between constructive *machloket* which encourages growth, development and renewal, in contrast to disputes that lead to *sinat chinam*, is a familiar theme in Jewish texts. *Pirkei Avot*, (often translated as the Ethics of our Fathers) distinguishes between conflicts “for the sake of heaven”, such as between

Hillel and Shammai; and those that are not "for the sake of heaven" (Chapter 2, Mishna 17), as in the case of Korach, presented as the archetype of an individual who seeks fame and power.

The Jewish perspective on constructive conflict, as illustrated in the central example of the schools of Hillel and Shammai, separates the substantive issues from personalities and emotions. In other words, they respected the other's opinions, and agreed to disagree. This principle is also important to modern Jewish leaders and philosophers. In his book, *Arguments for the Sake of Heaven*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks emphasizes the difference between the positive process of constructive conflict, which promotes debate and does not end with a decision or labeling of "winner and loser", with destructive conflict which seeks to gain power, property, or control for one of the participants.

In the two thousand years of exile, the tradition of conflict continued, dividing communities, synagogues and schools of learning. But in the Diaspora, when a dispute, regardless of motivation, led to a split and the groups broke away from each other, each could evolve. *Machloket* was not only acceptable as a norm, but the social and political environment served to encourage groups to split. Without the need for political and social unity, the costs of such divisions were usually lower than the risks of a violent explosion.

However, now, particularly with the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in Israel, the consequences of political and social conflict are significantly greater. In the democratic framework, we no longer have the "luxury" of breaking-off from the collective Jewish nation. In our disputes, it is up to each of us, regardless of how strongly we feel about an issue, to find a way to stay within the tradition of *machloket* "for the sake of heaven".