

*A controversy for the sake of Heaven will have lasting value, but a controversy not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. What is an example of a controversy for the sake of Heaven? The debates of Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of a controversy not for the sake of Heaven? The rebellion of Korach and his associates.*

The tale of Korach and his allies became the paradigm of a completely destructive dispute. Their argument arose from jealousy and the desire for personal gain and power. There was nothing redeeming in this dispute, and its consequences were violent and catastrophic. However, an argument that is for heaven's sake, for a noble purpose, is valued, even cherished, in Jewish tradition. When there is an active quest for understanding God's word, collaboration of minds yields more fruit than thinking in isolation, and disagreement sharpens the minds of the interlocutors. Much of rabbinic literature records arguments among the sages. On points of law, even minority views that were rejected are remembered and carefully studied to this day.

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"*Lshem shamayim*" means "in the name of heaven," i.e., "not in my own name." The root of the word "*mah'loket*," (*het-lamed-kuf*), is *helek*, "part," i.e., taking something apart. To cause dispute and division for one's own purposes is the way of hubris, arrogance, and narcissism. "Korach went the way of *mah'loket*, dispute and division. He caused division above, and he caused division below. *Mah'loket* is the opposite of *Shalom*, Peace." (Zohar Korach 3:176a). We have seen this in families, communities and congregations. Society acts to take apart practices for the benefit of all, like pollution, oppression, and inequality. This is the way of *shalom*.

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#### MISHNAH ON MAHLOKET IN HEBREW

הַטָּז [יז] כָּל מַחְלוֹקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם; וְשֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אִין סוֹפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם. אִיזוֹ הִיא מַחְלוֹקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֹ מַחְלוֹקֶת הַלֵּל וְשָׁמַיִ; וְשֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֹ מַחְלוֹקֶת קוֹרַח וְעֵדְתוֹ.

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What does an "argument for the sake of heaven" mean? It is such a strange expression, but it explains so richly why we usually argue: to prove an agenda, to demonstrate our cleverness, to display our ego, irony or sarcasm. Debates are so often the mind-candy of the intelligent or a platform for emotional showmanship. Leonardo da Vinci once said: "Anyone who conducts an argument by appealing to authority is not using his intelligence; he is just using his memory." This *mishnah* gives us an authenticity challenge. What are you really trying to prove? Love first. It's not ultimately about you.

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Scholars of conflict resolution have often referred to the relationship between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai as the quintessential Jewish model of constructive conflict. Despite their sharp differences of opinion, the two groups are described as succeeding in maintaining strong peaceful relationships, respectfully disagreeing with one another, and continuing to marry one another. In practice, I have never met anyone who did not claim that their own side in the conflict was constructive, and the other side destructive. The *Mishnah* challenges us to acknowledge that our motivations are not always entirely pure and the other side also may have a legitimate opposing truth, also working "for the sake of Heaven".

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The *Mishnah's* distinction refers simultaneously to three dimensions of dispute: (1) subject matter, (2) tone and style of communication, and (3) the parties' intentions. On the level of content, a controversy for the sake of heaven is a strong, reasoned disagreement about a matter of sacred import. On the level of process, an argument is righteous to the degree that parties comport themselves with seriousness, dignity and respect, honoring the matter at hand and all persons engaged in the dispute. Most deeply, honorable argument is grounded neither in ego needs nor desire to shame or defeat the other, but in the desire to learn from others about weighty truths, even to discern the will of the Divine.

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