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 Korah and his associates.

The tale of Korah 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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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 eloquence, and inequality. This is the way of shalom.

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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 the weighty truths, even to discern the will of the Divine.

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