



9 Adar

What is *Machloket l'Shem Shamayim*?

The text in this lesson is the source of the term “*Machloket l'Shem Shamayim*” which can be loosely translated as “conflict for the sake of Heaven”.

Background:

Often people have negative associations with conflict. Rabbinic Judaism, however, has always valued *machloket*, conflict. For example, the Talmud, the primary Rabbinic work of the first millennium, lists literally thousands of *machlokot*, conflicts or disagreements among the rabbis. The rabbis saw engaging in *machloket* as a critical part of uncovering truth. The key, however, is to engage in *machloket* in a constructive way—one that preserves the relationship.

Goals:

Students will learn the term “*machloket*” and will understand that one can engage in *machloket* in a destructive way resulting in a damaged relationship. Or, one can engage in *machloket* in a constructive way, where the relationship is preserved.

Lesson Activities:

- Introduction:
- Text Study
- Wrapping Up

Lesson Activities

Introduction: Constructive or Destructive

- Ask students to think of the most recent conflict they were involved with or witnessed. The conflict could be with a friend, a teacher, a parent or someone else. If in a classroom, consider having students write who was involved in the conflict and briefly what the conflict was about.

- Survey students on the following statements. Decide how students should respond—by raising a hand, standing up or moving to a particular part of the room, if they agree.
 - The conflict I wrote about was between two students, teenagers or children.
 - The conflict I wrote about was between an adult and a student.
 - The conflict I wrote about was between two adults.
 - At the end of engaging in the conflict, both sides were satisfied with the outcome.
 - At the end of engaging in the conflict, both sides were unhappy.
 - At the end of engaging in the conflict, one side was satisfied but the other was still unhappy.
 - In my opinion, conflict is generally a bad thing.
 - In my opinion, conflict can be a good thing.

Tell students that the Hebrew term for conflict is “*machloket*”. In this lesson, they will see what the rabbis thought about *machloket*.

Text Study: *Machloket L'Shem Shamayim*

- Our first text is a *mishna* from *Mishna Avot* which is often called *Pirkei Avot* or “Ethics of our Fathers”. As with all of *Mishna*, it was written in about the 3rd century CE in the Land of Israel. The second text is from the commentary of the “Bertinoro”, R. Ovadiah Bertinoro, a 16th century Italian commentator. Read the first text together. The *mishna* is somewhat unclear. Ask students to offer questions about the text. Typical questions might be: *What does “l’shem Shamayim” mean? How can a conflict be l’shem Shamayim? What exactly will endure (or continue to exist) after the conflict ends?*
- The Bertinoro asks one of these questions: what exactly endures? Read the second text together. Ask students what the Bertinoro means by the people enduring. He may be referring to the fact that sometimes people engage in conflict in ways that are destructive to the relationship. In these cases, the conflict becomes so personal that it is no longer about the thing that was initially disagreed upon but rather it becomes about the people, and feelings get hurt. On the other hand, if done properly, as can be seen from the first text, conflict can be a catalyst for learning and growth. This is part of the meaning of a machloket being l’shem shamayim, or as it may be referred to in conflict resolution literature “constructive conflict.” In summary, almost any conflict can be defined as *l’shem shamayim* if one engages in it constructively.
- Note to teacher: For further reading on machloket l’shem shamayim and its relationship to destructive and constructive conflict theory, see <http://www.pardes.org.il/upload/jdcc%20occasional%20paper%20-%20a4.pdf>

Engaging in Machloket L'Shem Shamayim

- Have students consider the conflict they wrote about in the opening activity and decide whether it was constructive or destructive. If it was constructive, have them write a general rule that both sides followed to keep the conflict from becoming destructive. If the conflict was destructive, have students write a general rule that the two parties could have followed to keep the conflict as *machloket l'shem shamayim*. Allow students to share their rule with a partner or the whole group. Some examples of principles are:
 - Try to focus on the problem and not make generalizations about the person.
 - Try and understand the perspective of the other person.
 - Not to interrupt others when they are expressing an opinion, even if that is hard.
 - Think about what the other person is saying and be prepared to change your opinion.
- Consider creating a bulletin board display with the students' ideas of the definition of and how to engage in *machloket l'shem shamayim*. Title the board, "Tips from Grade X on How to Engage in *Machloket L'Shem Shamayim*" and place a large copy of the *mishna* text in the center of the bulletin board. Post the student ideas around the *mishna*.

Resource Activity 2.4a: What is 'Machloket l'Shem Shamayim'?
Activity Student Text

משנה אבות ה:יז

כָּל מַחְלֻקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם.
וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוֹפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם.

Mishna Avot 5:17

Every *machloket* (conflict) which is *l'shem shamayim* is destined to endure.

And that which is not *l'shem shamayim*, is destined not to endure.

רבי עובדיה מברטנורא, אבות ה:יז

כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים סופה להתקיים - כלומר שאנשי המחלוקת ההיא מתקיימים ואינם אובדין.

Bertinoro, Avot 5:17

[The *mishnah* says:] Every *machloket* (conflict) which is *l'shem shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven), is destined to endure."

This means that the people engaged in the conflict will endure, and will not be lost.