



Excerpted from *The Torah of Reconciliation*, by Rabbi Sheldon Lewis
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JEWISH SOURCES SPEAK ELOQUENTLY TO CIVIL DISCOURSE

The recognition and the celebration of diverse perspectives provide the setting for a worldview in which truth has many faces. No one can claim possession of a single pathway to truth.

Operating from such a point of view, the rabbis were much less likely to close their minds to others. From the House of Study into the wide world, valuing the richness of facets of truth fosters respect and support for others of widely different points of view. Conflict over truth claims is much less likely.

The following texts, drawn from the length and breadth of Jewish tradition, address the immense possibilities of passionate respectful engagement on crucial issues facing a community. The reflections on each source are taken from a book entitled The Torah of Reconciliation by Rabbi Sheldon Lewis scheduled for publication this year. The topics included are as follows:

- I. **Two Kinds of Arguments**
- II. **The Multiplicity of Truths**
- III. **No One Has Sole Possession of Truth**
- IV. **Greater Wisdom Through Disagreement**
- V. **Deeper Relationships Through Disagreement**
- VI. **Hillel and Shammai Model An Argument for the Sake of Heaven**

I. Two Kinds of Arguments

Now Korah, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men; and they rose up in face of Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty men; they were princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown.

(Numbers 16:1-2)

A controversy for Heaven's sake will have lasting value, but a controversy not for Heaven's sake will not endure.

What is an example of a controversy for Heaven's sake? The debates of Hillel and Shammai.

What is an example of a controversy not for Heaven's sake? The rebellion of Korah and his associates. (Mishnah Avot 5:17)

A city in which there is controversy will in the end be destroyed. And the sages said: "If there is controversy in a city, blood will be shed." A synagogue in which there is controversy will in the end be destroyed. A home in which there is controversy will in the end be destroyed. The sages said: "A home in which there is controversy will bring promiscuity." When there are two courts dwelling in a city with controversy between them, in the end they will die. The sages said: "A controversy between two courts (brings) destruction to the world." (Minor Talmudic Tractates, Tractate Derech Eretz Zuta, Chapter 7, Halachah 37)

Reflection: 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. The consequences were violent and catastrophic. There was nothing redeeming in this dispute. It was not an argument for the “sake of Heaven”. The rabbis are very wary of any dispute that is not for a high purpose.

However, there is another kind of argument which is valued. In fact, argument is celebrated in Jewish tradition when it is for Heaven’s sake. When there is an active quest for understanding God’s word, when the purpose is noble, controversy is not only accepted but even cherished. The premise is that a collaboration of minds yields more fruit than anyone 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.

The historical model for an argument “for the sake of Heaven” comes from the first century of the Common Era. Hillel and Shammai were sages of the Mishnah who disagreed passionately but amiably over hundreds of issues. Their students after them continued to debate and disagree. They are referred to as Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, the Schools of Hillel and Shammai.

II. The Multiplicity of Truths

And God spoke all these words. (Exodus 20:1)

And God spoke all these words. Do you then make your ear like a grain hopper and acquire a heart that can understand the words of the scholars who declare a thing unclean as well as those who declare it clean; the words of those who declare a thing forbidden and those who declare it permitted; the words of those who disqualify an object as well as those who uphold its fitness.

(Bamidbar Rabbah 14:4)

In the first chapter of Chaggigah (3b), (we find this interpretation of the phrase) “those who form groups”. They are the scholars who sit in groups and occupy themselves with Torah.

*These declare a thing unclean, and those declare it clean; these declare a thing forbidden, and those declare it permitted; these disqualify an object, and those uphold its fitness. Lest one say: “How can I study Torah now?”, this teaches that they were all given from one Shepherd as it is written **And God spoke all these words**. You also should make your ear like a grain hopper and acquire an understanding heart that understands the words of those who declare unclean and those who declare clean, those who forbid and those who permit, those who disqualify and those who uphold its fitness.*

Can one not raise a doubt about the need to say that (it all) comes from the mouth of the Master of all deeds? Why is this language used here? It comes to teach that it should not trouble one that if the Halachah does not follow (some views), how are they (all) given from one Shepherd? What are we to make of them? To this, it says that they are from the mouth of the Master of all

deeds. The meaning is that just as the multiplicity of creatures are from Him, may He be blessed, just as all creatures are separate and some are even complete opposites, nonetheless all are from the Name, may He be blessed, Who is One and in all of them there is a dimension of truth. Just as we say (that) He does the truth, and His work is truth. For in its own way, water is truth in the way of its creation, and fire also which is opposite in the character of its creation is also truth. Likewise the multiplicity of views in themselves are all from God may He be blessed. And even if they are contradictory, nonetheless there is a dimension of truth just as clear proof will come from metaphor and simile.

Just as among all who exist, each has a unique dimension of truth. Nonetheless at times one of them may be found to be closer to truth than another, and it is the most complete truth. For there is no doubt that the human being is closer to God than other living beings.

Similarly, among differences of opinion, there (is one) which is closer to complete truth and becomes the Halachah (the law). Yet until the Halachah (is established), that which is not the complete truth should not be dismissed before the other (view). Just as among creatures that nonetheless exist and are complete and bear a dimension of truth.

Thus they (the sages) have said: Even though one forbids and one permits and one disqualifies and one declares (an object) fit, one God spoke them (all). Thus the Holy One Blessed be He said: "From one aspect the law is such while from another it is such." Yet one (view) completely contains the truth in itself, without a particular (limiting) dimension. Thus we should not dismiss other (views) as though there was nothing in them just as we should not dismiss a creature even though one among them is more upright and true. Therefore every one among the views is Torah, and there is a good reward for those who create them whose intention is for the

sake of Heaven, for the One who spoke them for they are all from Him. (Maharal MePrague, D'rush Al HaTorah 42a)

Each one (each sage) presents his view. One gives a reason for permitting, and one gives a reason for forbidding. One compares a matter to another matter in this way, and one compares it to another subject. It is possible to say: "Both these and those are the words of the living God." At times one view is applicable, at times another view, for the view is altered in accordance with the change in circumstances even if the change is modest. (Rashi on Ketubot 57a, beginning with: "Ha kamashma lahn")

"Both these and those are the words of the living God." The rabbis of France, may their memory be a blessing, asked: "How is it possible that both are the words of the living God, and one forbids while the other permits?" And they answered: "When Moses ascended to receive the Torah, they showed him with reference to every matter the forty nine ways to prohibit and the forty nine ways to permit. And he asked the Holy One blessed be He about this. And He said that this is passed into the sages of Israel in every generation, and the determination is in accordance with them. And this is correct according to interpretation, and there is reason and mystery in this matter according to the way of truth. (Chiddushei HaRitva, Eruvin, 13b, beginning with "Elu v'elu")

*They (the sages) said: "Rabbi Meir had one student who 'purified' the reptile (non-kosher animal) with forty nine proofs." (Eruvin 13b). All of this was (possible) because regarding the Word about which it was said: **The voice was great and did not cease.** (Deuteronomy 5:19), there were all of these facets which change and keep turning from impure to pure, from*

*forbidden to permitted, from unfit to proper. For it is impossible to believe that this Voice lacked anything. Thus within the greatness of this Voice, there were words which varied from every angle, one over against the other. And all of the sages received that which belonged to him, for it was not only the prophets who received from Mt. Sinai but all of the sages who would arise in every generation. For everyone received one's own as it is said: **God spoke these words to the entire congregation.** (Deuteronomy 5:19).*

Regarding this, He said: "Both these and those are the words of the living God." (Eruvin 13b), for if one of them (the sages) would err in that which he received, He would not have said this. These are the seventy faces of Torah which take opposite positions on every side, for that Voice was divided into seventy branches as we have explained.. And Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi says: (It is) like a person striking the anvil, and sparks fly out here and there.. the power of the hammer is such that with reference to one thing, it smashes the rock into any number of pieces. Likewise the Voice in which the Torah was given. (Recanti on Torah, Exodus 20:1)

Reflection: From one single word of Torah, this stream of critical ideas flows! The Midrash notices the seemingly extra word "all" "kol" in the verse *And God spoke all these words* when introducing the Ten Commandments. The text could easily have read: "*And God spoke these words.*" In the rabbinic tradition that would flow from Torah, there would be many, many differences of opinion strongly held by different sages. The teacher of this midrash suggests that these often opposite views were implicit at Sinai and were even mysteriously spoken by God. If

so, opposing positions would be supremely worthy of respect. This teaching advocates an open heart to welcome a large spectrum of views as to how to live in accordance with Torah.

The Maharal of Prague develops this principle. He suggests that truth has more than one face modeled on creation itself. Truth is too rich and variegated to be contained in one point of view, in one face of Torah.

Rashi's brief comment is more practical. The system of Halachah is intended to serve the ages. He explains that changes over time require different positions. A halachic view which dominates at one moment in time may need to step aside for another perspective when the realities of life change. He implies a legal pragmatism in which the law preserves a spectrum of views in which each might one day have its appropriate time to prevail.

The Ritva affirms that differences of view are ancient, having been affirmed by God on Sinai. Although this is mysterious, it is also wise.

Recanti explains that the Voice at Sinai was too rich to be limited to one perspective. It contained many like the sparks which are kindled when a hammer strikes the anvil. He refers to seventy faces of Torah, an idiom pointing to uncounted aspects. Every sage who would comment after Sinai was recapturing one dimension among the limitless possibilities inherent in the Voice at Sinai.

This source which continually flows has a front face and a back (face), and from it emerge changes and opposites. And the faces change and become opposites to render impure and pure,

to forbid and to permit, to declare unfit or proper as is known to those wise of heart. And the great voice which never ceases stems from the source and comes from it, and is inclusive of all the changing faces for nothing is lacking. And from the greatness and strength of the voice, the words change from every perspective, one opposite the other. And every one of the prophets and the sages received one's own. This one received "impure, and this one "pure" in accordance with where one stands and one's receptivity. And everything came from one place and goes to one place. And in the commentary of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai may peace be upon him, (we find): (Zohar III, 6b) "Come and see. There is not one word said by all of the scholars, one this way and one this way concerning Torah, that does not entirely go to one place and be collected into one wellspring. Thus it is written: (the sound of the shofar at Sinai) "goes". As you say, 'all of the streams flow to the sea'. And it is written: 'All goes to one place.'"

The intent is that all of the words emerged from the source, the beginning of thought on High, and spread and proceed to the end which is the last sea. And it is one place in which everything is united and in which unity is completed. About this it is said that (the contradictory words of the sages) are from one Shepherd, and that which all of them said one God gave them. This teaches that all of the opposites and the changes did not come from different powers but rather from one unique Place everything came even while there is no change or alteration in it (that one Place). This teaches in reference to this wondrous secret that every one of the sages upholds his view and brings proof from the Torah in accordance with his view for unity is not achieved without this. And just as perfection in all of this (is accomplished) on High, likewise there is a need to perfect and to fashion the Name (of God) below.

For this reason, (the sages) said: “Even you should make your ear into a grain hopper and acquire for yourself a heart that hears the words of those who declare impure and those who declare pure...” for this is the way of perfection and completion to do for the sake of God. Along this way, one should say: “Both these and those are the words of the living God.”

Since this is far from what was and very deep, who is able to grasp it? For this matter is dependent on thought (wisdom) that is impossible to grasp, and the 50th gate is hidden even from our teacher Moses, may his memory serve as a blessing. For all of these words seem to contradict each other and are different from one another. From our perspective, we are unable to comprehend from our domain and our strength. Thus it is impossible to uphold two contradictory sides, and the law is fixed according to one of the two views. For this reason, (the sages) said: “Both these and those are the words of the living God.”, and all is one from the perspective of the Giver (of the law) may He be blessed. But from our side, they are different words, and the law is in accordance with the school of Hillel alone. (Meir Ibn Gabbai, Avodat HaKodesh, Chapter 23)

III. No One Has Sole Possession of Truth

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... (Genesis 1:26)

Rabbi Simon said: When the time came for the Holy One Blessed be He to create the first Adam, the angels of (Divine) service broke up into opposing groups. Some among them say: “Do not create (Adam).” Some among them say: “(Adam) should be created.” This is what is written: “Kindness and truth met; righteousness and peace kissed.” (Psalms 85:11)

Kindness says: "Let (Adam) be created because (Adam) will bestow kindnesses."

Truth says: "Let (Adam) not be created because he is entirely (made of) lies."

Righteousness says: "Let (Adam) be created for he will do (acts of) righteousness."

And peace says: "Let (Adam) not be created for he is entirely dissension."

*What did the Holy One Blessed be He do? He took truth and flung him to the ground. Thus it is written: **You will cast truth to the ground.** (Daniel 8:12)*

*The angels of (Divine) service said before the Holy One Blessed be He: "Master of worlds! Why do you despise Your seal of truth? Let truth rise from the ground as it is written: **Truth will grow from the earth.**(Psalms 85:12)..."*

Rabbi Hunah the Rabbi of Tzipori said: "While the angels of (Divine) service were arguing with one another and occupied with one another, the Holy One Blessed be He created him (Adam)."

He (God) said to them: "Why are you debating? He (Adam) is already created!" (Midrash Rabbah Genesis 8:5)

What was the advantage in casting aside "truth" while "peace" remained which also argues; "He should not be created." Yet when we cast aside truth, peace will prevail. The root of

argument is that everyone fights for his own “truth.” But when we push “truth” aside, there is no longer something about which to dispute. There is thus no argument, and “peace” has no claim to make. (In the name of Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, quoted in Aharon Yaakov Greenberg, Itturey Torah, Vol. 1, p.20)

Reflection: The potential pluses and minuses of being human, symbolized as angels, are imagined by the rabbis counseling God at the moment of decision-making. Of all those debating, it is only “truth” who is cast out. The way is then open to accomplish this questionable act of creation.

What is it about “truth” that is so pivotal? What does it mean that “truth” is cast aside? Truth, in fact, is an esteemed Jewish value. It is declared to represent the very “Seal of God”. The midrashic imagination here testifies openly to the ambiguity of being human. The sages already knew that the results of the creation of the human would lead to the most opposite effects, to extraordinary good and to pure evil and to every admixture along the spectrum of moral activity. Telling the truth fully about both possibilities could discourage the entire enterprise. That God’s own Self casts down truth suggests that, even while knowing the truth inherent in this dramatic creative act, God is eager to take this risk. That the world would have the opportunity to see kindness, righteousness, and peace freely chosen made the entire act of creation worthy.

The Kotzker Rebbe makes another pointed argument. Many of the deep divisions which separate human communities stem from arguing truth claims whether they are religious or political. These divisions too often are passionate and mutually exclusive. If the source of such disputes were to be removed, peacemaking in the world would be much more approachable.

God's act of dismissing "truth" is seen here as a move to creating a more peaceable humanity. If "truth" claims were not on the table, people would much more easily find ways to dwell together in peace.

IV. Greater Wisdom Through Disagreement

*Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Chanina: "Torah scholars increase peace in the world, as it is said: **All of your children are taught by God, and great is the peace of your children.** Do not read "banayich" "your children" but rather "bonayich", "your builders" **Those who love Your Torah have great peace; nothing makes them stumble.** (Psalms 119:165) **May there be peace within your walls, security within your gates, for the sake of my brethren and companions I say: May peace reside within you. For the sake of the House of the Lord I will seek your welfare.** (Psalms 122; 7-9) **May the Lord grant His people strength; may the Lord bless His people with peace.** (Psalms 29:11)" (Talmud, Berachot, 64a)*

There are those who err thinking that world peace will not be built except by means of one form in points of view and qualities. Therefore when they see students of Torah scholars inquiring into wisdom and the knowledge of Torah, and, by means of their searching, the perspectives and approaches multiply, they believe that they thus cause argument and the opposite of peace. Yet truthfully this is not so, for the true peace cannot come into the world except by means of the value of a peace of many faces. A peace of many faces means that all sides and approaches are seen; and it becomes clear how there is a place for them all, each one according to its worth, its place, and its content. And, on the contrary, all positions that appear superfluous or contradictory will be seen, once the truth of wisdom is revealed in all of her many-sidedness, for

*only by means of the coming together of all the parts and all of the details, and all of the views that seem different, and all of the divided branches, truly by their means the light of truth and righteousness will appear, (along with) the knowledge of God, His reverence and His love, and the light of the Torah of truth. Therefore Torah scholars increase peace, for just as they broaden, explicate, and give birth to new words of Torah, in (locating new) aspects out of different aspects in which there is multiplication and divisions (of view) of themes, in this they increase peace, as it is said: **All of your children are taught by God.** For they will all recognize, all of them, even the opposites in their ways and in their approaches as it appears, that they are all **taught by God**, and in each of them there is an aspect by which the knowledge of God and the light of His truth will be revealed.*

and great ('rav') is the peace of your children** It does not say "great ('gadol') is the peace of your children" which would point to a picture of one great body which would fit that imagined idea that peace requires just unified words and equalized ideas which in truth diminishes the power of wisdom and the broadening of knowledge. For the light of knowledge must spread to all of its aspects, to all of the facets of the light within it. But multiplicity ("ribuey") is (the sense of) **rav shalom banayich, great is the peace of your children.

*"Do not read '**banayich**' 'your children' but rather '**bonayich**', 'your builders' because the structure will be built from different parts. And the truth of the light of the world will be constructed from many points of view and varying approaches, for "both these and those are the words of the living God" from ways of service and guidance and different education. For each one has its place and its worth, and no talent or wholeness should be lost but rather enlarged and a place found for it. And if one sees a contradiction from one concept to another, out of this*

will wisdom build its house. And one must inquire into matters to locate the inner law in those concepts, for thus will the words be straightened out and not be contradictory one towards the other. And the multiplicity of views which emerges from the differences of souls and education is just that which enriches wisdom and causes its breadth so that in the end all of the words will be understood as they should be, and it will be perceived that it is impossible that the building of peace be constructed except by means of all of those influences which appear to be struggling for dominance one with the other. (Rabbi Avraham Yitzchok Kook, Olat Ra-a-yah, Part I, page 330)

Reflection: Peace is often understood as synonymous with oneness. Rabbi Kook challenges that perspective. Instead he suggests a notion of peace encompassing diversity which includes all of the unnumbered dimensions and pathways to wisdom. To attain truth, in his view, is to encourage the full exploration of possibilities. In honest and passionate dialogue and dispute lies the greatest hope for unearthing the nuances of knowledge. A greater wisdom emerges from open discourse than from any other more limiting approach.

Implicit in his approach is appreciation for those who hold opposing views in dialogue. Even when an argument is passionate, even when each party steadfastly holds onto its position and rejects the opinion of the other, there should be an underlying sense of valuing the other. Out of the give and take of dialogue and even polar division emerges a much richer vision of what is true and right. Peace and division are not antithetical.

V. Deeper Relationships Through Disagreement

And it came to pass, as soon as he came near to the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and broke them beneath the mount. (Exodus 32:19)

And the Lord said to Moses: "Hew two tables of stone like the first; and I will write upon the tables the words that were on the first tables, which you did break." (Exodus: 34:1)

which you did break God agreed with his (Moses') act. As it is said: *which you did break*, "yashar koach" (a hearty congratulations) for shattering (the tablets). (Rashi on Exodus 34:1)

At times the nullification of Torah is its establishment. As it is said: which you did break, may your strength continue for shattering (the tablets). The deed of shattering the tablets was a deed of establishing Torah by means of its nullification. For the sages said that were it not that the tablets were shattered, Torah would not have been forgotten within Israel. (Eruvin 54) Thus in the shattering of the tablets there was also a certain forgetting of Torah. We learn from this a wondrous new insight that it is possible that Torah be enlarged by means of forgetting Torah so much so that in this way it is possible to receive a "yashar koach" (a hearty congratulations) for forgetting Torah. Go and inquire that which the sages said that 300 halachot (laws) were forgotten during the days of mourning for Moses, and Atniel the son of Kenaz recovered them by means of interpretation. Thus these words of Torah, the restoration of halachot (laws) by casuistry, are words of Torah that were enlarged only by forgetting Torah. Not only this but the whole subject of machloket (disagreement) in law is the result of forgetting Torah. Nonetheless the sages said: "Although these declare pure and those declare impure, these declare unfit and

those declare fit, these exonerate and those declare guilty, etc, both these and those are the words of the living God.” The result is that all of the differences of opinion and the variations in approaches represent the enlargement of Torah and its adornment, born truly out of the power of forgetting Torah.

*And an even greater new insight emerges for us from here- how much more greatly accentuated is the power of the Oral Torah which comes to light in differences of opinions than in a place of agreement. For in the (concept of) “both these and those are the words of the living God” is included the fundamental idea that the perspective of the view dismissed from halachah (the law) is (still) a Torah view, as long as it was said in accordance with the rubrics of procedure of the Oral Torah. And since Torah was given (to be adjudicated) according to the views of Torah sages, if afterwards, they (these sages) decide in accordance with the dismissed view, from then on the halachah changes along the lines of (their view of) truth. Therefore the disagreements among the sages of Torah reveal the power of the Oral Torah much more than their (being in) agreement. “The war of Torah” is not just one aspect among others in words of Torah. Rather the war of Torah represents a positive creation of new Torah values which cannot be found in mere words of Torah. **“Therefore it is said in the book of the wars of the Lord Vahev in Sufa”** (Numbers 21:14) And the sages explained: “Even if a father and a son or a teacher and student (come to) hate one another (in the midst of a disagreement over the (law), they do not depart from there until they become lovers of each other.” From the first (earlier) perspective, these words come to teach the advantage in the great power (to nurture) a union of love imbedded in words of Torah, meaning that the power (to nurture) a union of love is so great that it promises faithful friendship even for those who previously were despisers of one another. According to this understanding, the advantage here is that, despite the hatred during*

the time of disagreement, in the end love comes and is decisive, and they do not depart until they become lovers. Yet since the point has been clarified that the war of Torah is a stage of new creation beyond the level of mere words of Torah, this clarity will teach us to know that the theme is not that the love which emerges at the end comes despite the previous argument, but rather it is the pathway for the growth of this love, that it is born and enlarged truly upon the ground of the preceding argument. For every love reaches its height in the time when two sides are partners in creativity. And two sides that butt heads in halachah (law) are partners in creating a new Torah value whose name is the “war of Torah”. (Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner, Pachad Yitzchak, “Chanukah”, 3)

Reflection: The Pachad Yitzchak reflects on why Moses is applauded for his shattering of the precious stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments. On the face of it, his act was an impetuous response to the shocking sight of the golden calf. Yet not only is Moses never taken to task. He is even warmly praised by God! Rabbi Hutner explains that the casting down of the tablets symbolized the loss of the integrity of the tradition. Forgetfulness set in, and the full transmission of what was received on Sinai was lost. What would seem to be a great setback, however, proved to be a boon. By exegesis, the lost portions of the law were recoverable. Even more, forgetting led to rabbinic disagreements which clustered around virtually every area of Jewish law. And it was in the matrix of disagreement that a new, extraordinary source of creativity arose. In the passion and energy invested in even long-standing disputes, new law emerged, richer and more insightful than was previously known. Out of the partnership between interlocutors locked into diverse views, the tradition grew and was deepened immensely.

Rabbi Hutner adds a further nuance to his discussion. In the heat of dispute, the “war of Torah” is waged. Earlier sages declare that the intensity of feelings provoked in disagreement may lead to enmity, but in the end the disputants learn to love one another. Rabbi Hutner speculates that we are not to understand that love develops *despite* the strong feelings of hatred while the dispute was in progress. Instead he suggests that love is the natural consequence of the halachic (legal) process which includes freewheeling discussion and intense disagreement. When two or more people are so engaged, and the yield is a new, unique creative precept of law, they develop a faithful, respectful, and even loving bond with each other. Passionate disputes can result in profound kinship among those involved.

Rabbi Hutner’s reflections surely reflect his experience of the House of Study in which students reenact the disputes of the pages of Talmudic discourse that they are learning. The depth of disagreement in a sacred text often resurfaces as two or more students grapple with the points of argument. Passion on the page can translate into passion among the students of the page. The result is soul touching soul as interlocutors engage with each other. One’s “chevrutah”, one’s “study partner/ friend”, with whom one rehearses the arguments of old, often becomes a lifelong friend.

Passionate disagreement is not antithetical to love. This is the stirring teaching that emerges from Jewish tradition. It is a hopeful contribution to conflict resolution in other places where passion and intractable division are to be found.

VI. Hillel and Shammai Model An Argument for the Sake of Heaven

“Rabbi Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel, the former asserting, ‘The Law is in agreement with our views’ and the latter contending, ‘The Halachah is in agreement with our views’. Then a heavenly voice issued announcing, ‘(The teachings) of both are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Bet Hillel.’ Since, however, ‘both are the words of the living God’ what was it that entitles Bet Hillel to have the Law fixed in agreement with their rulings?

Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Bet Shammai, and were even so (humble) as to mention the words of Bet Shammai before their own.” (Talmud, Eruvin 13b)

Reflection: The ideal of peace in human association included provision for even passionate disagreement. The different perspectives of Hillel and Shammai on matters of the Law were filled with passion and stubborn argument. After all, they dealt with mapping out the pathways to a life of holiness in service to God. However there was an overarching bond of kinship that transcended their differences and taught them and their descendants to treasure their disputes. The heavenly voice that was heard declaring the views of both sages as “words of the living God” emphatically teaches that there are facets of truth in both sides of their arguments. Yet Hillel’s views were finally chosen as a standard of practice not because of the power of his arguments but rather because of the way he conducted himself vis a vis Shammai. Essentially he

was humble and patient. He carefully studied the opposing position, and he even gave precedence to airing Shammai's position before stating his own.

When the oral narratives of the Talmudic period were recorded, they included numerous pairs and triads of scholars who were wont to be in frequent dispute. Akiva and Yishmael, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yosi and Rabbi Yehudah, Rav and Samuel, Abaye and Rava, and Hillel and Shammai were but a few. Having a frequent interlocutor/disputant was a sign of great distinction. In Mishnah Avot, the chain of tradition was passed down by pairs of scholars, implying that the integrity of the transmission would be best assured and strengthened if it were in the hands of at least two leading sages.

Regarding the argument among the righteous that took place during his time, he (Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk) said: “ ‘Every argument for the sake of heaven will endure.’ (Mishnah Avot 5:19) Since the argument was for the sake of Heaven, in the end, i.e. in the latter generations, they (the two sides) will join together and become one. That is the meaning of ‘will endure’”. (Siach Sarfei Kodesh, Vol. 3, Sifriyati, B'nei Brak,p.105)

Reflection: The Kotsker Rebbe here suggests that sharp, even long standing argument for a high purpose is the way to strengthening bonds among the interlocutors. Such disputes, while apparently divisive in the short term, ultimately would lead to enduring, mutually appreciative friendships. The verb he uses (“y’shad-chu”) to describe the two sides becoming one is the language of affection and marriage! At the other end of sustained argument, respect grows and the seeds of devoted relationships are planted.