

The Lost Spiritual Practice of Machloket

Kol Nidre 5784 ~ Rabbi Andrew Markowitz ~ Temple Adath Israel on the Main Line

Being Jewish is a gift. Truly. Sure – there are the *mitzvot* – commandments, things we can and can't do. Prescriptions, Proscriptions, and Prohibitions galore. Each one gives us a distinct pathway to spiritual practice and, hopefully, access to meaning making in our otherwise chaotic lives. Judaism is rife with these different spiritual modes – kashrut and shabbat lend a sense of intentionality and purpose to the way we structure our eating habits and time, respectively. Ritual and prayer place our stories and relationship with the Divine in a larger unbroken context of millenia of Jewish practice. Study brings us closer to tradition and the voices of our ancestors. But there is one mode of Jewish spiritual practice that has fallen out of favor in our modern world. Indeed – it is an art, a skill – a finely honed muscle that needs to be cultivated and worked on. It's probably the hardest and least accessible mode of Jewish spiritual practice... at least for me. It's the lost art of Machloket L'Shem Shamayim. The lost spiritual practice of disagreement – or arguing with our fellows for the sake of heaven

Now, you might be thinking – RABBI – how can disagreement be a spiritual practice – or pathway? Doesn't it cause strife and pain? Doesn't it expose fissures in relationships? Doesn't it push people apart?? While spiritual practice is supposed to bring us together in shared purpose, shared vision. Spiritual practice isn't supposed to engender division. To which I respond, YES – AND. Not but – AND – for Jews – for Judaism – arguing – disagreeing – for a larger purpose is unifying – IS fundamentally a community building process. We learn in Pirkei Avot –

Pirkei Avot 5:17

משנה אבות ה':י"ז

(יז) כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, סופה להתקיים... איזו היא מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת הלל ושמאי...
(17) Every argument that is [for the sake of] heaven's name, it is destined to endure... What [is an example of an argument for the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Hillel and Shammai.

Now it is clear that not every disagreement is a Machloket L'shem Shamayyim. An argument for the sake of heaven. What is a Machloket l'shem shamayyim – a holy or righteous argument – one that has cosmic significance, a process of argument that is both real and spiritually uplifting?? It is one in which the parties understand the stakes. It is one in which relationships are valued over ideas. It might be important here to introduce a rabbinic term that hasn't become part of our normal Jewish nomenclature. There is an idea in rabbinic Judaism of the *Bar Plugta* – literally the “Son of Disagreement”. This aramaic term comes to embody the ancient

Jewish spiritual practice of machloket. It describes a particular type of chevruta – of study partner. Part best friend, part study partner, part intellectual foil – sort of like the ancient rabbinic articulation of one’s best frenemie. Someone who you just can’t help but argue with. Someone with whom you don’t always agree, but you always respect. Someone whose ideas and disagreements sharpen your own insights. Someone who pushes you to think more critically – more seriously – maybe even differently about something that matters in this world. Someone who doesn’t just agree with us. Someone who helps us refine our own positions. Just like Hillel and Shammai – those famous and archetypical *b’nei plugta* from the mythological genesis of Rabbinic Judaism – And our tradition teaches in...

Yevamot 14b:4-10

Although Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed (on many critical issues) ... nevertheless .. they behaved with love and friendship toward one another...

יבמות י"ד ב:ד'-י'

אע"פ שנחלקו ב"ש וב"ה ...
ללמדך שחביבה וריעות
נוהגים זה בזה...

I am not sure we live in a world where that is currently what happens when we disagree with one another. A world in which relationship with the other is more important than the ideas we purport. We live in a world of intellectual tribalism. Where if you **disagree** with me, you are outside of my sphere. We live in a world where we are siloed – where algorithms choose to feed us content that reinforces our already preconceived notions. A world in which disagreement leads to disgust and disenfranchisement. Where we ostracize people for having different ideas, different approaches or solutions for going through the world. A world in which everything is either A or B. With or against. An intellectual landscape without gray, without nuance, without room for *machloket*.

Now that is not to say that every argument needs to be entertained. That every point and counterpoint has inherent value. Our earlier mishna from Avot continues –

Pirkei Avot 5:17	משנה אבות ה':י"ז
But if it is not [for the sake of] heaven's name -- it is not destined to endure... What [is an example of an argument not for the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Korach and all of his followers.	וְשִׁאינָה לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוּפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם... וְשִׁאינָה לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחְלֹקֶת קֶרַח וְכָל עֲדָתוֹ:

Only arguments made from a place “*L’shem Shamayyim*” – for heaven’s sake – for a greater purpose – the purpose of furthering society – of bringing people closer together – are considered holy arguments. There is a type of disagreement that is

decidedly **outside** the realm of religious practice. The example given in our mishna is that of the demagogue of the book of Numbers, Korah – Moshe's cousin who tried to stage a coup against Moshe and the Cohenim. This was an argument made not to hone one's own ideas – or to honestly engage with the other person in front of us – learning and pushing and helping one another to better define our own ideas. Rather, Korah's rebellion was a power grab. His disagreements were meant to be divisive and pull people apart – not bring them together. They were made from a place of selfishness and ego, not intellectual curiosity and a desire to do the right thing.

Those arguments still exist in our time, believe it or not. There are people who would seek to argue with us not from a place of genuine intellectual curiosity or a desire to understand, but to dominate and prove the other wrong. To eradicate narratives and perspectives – and not examine them for the sake of drawing closer to the people around us. These types of disagreements are damaging. And our culture is rife with them. The political discourse in this country is about being right, not discerning what's best for our world. We talk about owning the Libs, Owning the Conservatives – and not about how we can come together to make the world a better place. Our news cycles reinforce these divisions – political pundits talk about who won debates – ads during election cycles demonize and make ad-hominem attacks. We live in a world where by the time our leaders get into office, they have spent so much energy distancing themselves from one another that it is nigh impossible for them to work together. And it isn't just left versus right. It's inside the parties as well. From the far right to the far left – people are more concerned with coming out on top than they are about pushing themselves and our country forward towards a more equitable and just society. And don't get me started on the internal and external conversations surrounding Israel – especially considering this spring and summer's judicial crisis and subsequent demonstrations... or riots, depending on who you ask, are all wrapped up in these same sort of divisive narratives. There is hardly an issue or topic in this world that hasn't been weaponized or made into a wedge issue in one way or another...

And this translates to the way that we treat people in differing political tribes. Yes, there are positions that I find abhorrent. And there is a difference between the humanity of the person in front of me and what they purport to be true. I will say that again. People are more than the sum of their opinions. Don't mistake what I am saying, I couldn't encourage arguing with a neo-nazi. I wouldn't say that we should engage with someone who holds those beliefs... and I would say they are dangerous and most certainly beyond having an argument l'shem shamayyim. Hatred is self serving and spiritually corrosive. **I cannot, and do not** advocate engaging in an argument with those that seek to divide, destroy and devalue

others with their arguments. I am advocating for a reclamation of a form of argumentation that brings people closer, that builds, and that lifts up all sides. Instead of seeing issues as wedges, why don't we see them as opportunities for productive debate and discomfort?

This is the Jewish way of disagreeing – not seeking to squash the narrative or practice that disagrees with ours, but to elevate it. As it says in Mishnah Eduyot –

Mishnah Eduyot 1:5

(5) And why do they record the opinion of a single person among the many, when the halakhah must be according to the opinion of the many? So that if a court prefers the opinion of the single person it may depend on him...

משנה עדיות א':ה'

(ה) וְלִמָּה מְזַכְרִין דְּבַרִּי הַיָּחִיד בֵּין הַמֵּרֻבִּין, הוֹאִיל וְאִין הִלְכָּה אֶלָּא כְּדִבְרֵי הַמֵּרֻבִּין. שָׂאֵם יִרְאֶה בֵּית דִּין אֶת דְּבַרִּי הַיָּחִיד וְיִסְמְךָ עָלָיו...

Rabbinic disagreements, while they could presumably get heated in the moment, ALWAYS elevate the minority opinion amongst the majority. Even though we side with the school of Hillel 9 times out of 10 – we still have a record of Shammai's position. We still respect his teachings and are grateful for his school's contributions to Judaism. We don't discount the "losers" of an argument. We record the opinions of the positions we didn't adopt alongside those that we choose to practice. In that way, there are no losers in the Rabbinic spiritual practice of debate. Yes – we have a clear practice – a clear route forward – AND we are gifted by our tradition, an alternative opinion – a different viewpoint that is considered equally valid, if not equally practiced. This is because ultimately we believe that our rabbis are arguing from a set of shared principles and all seeking the same thing – to better the world around us... to discern the living will of God. There's a phrase in rabbinic theology we use when talking about these sorts of disagreements – Eilu V'Eilu devrei Elohim haChayyim – these AND these are the words of the living God. What would it look like for us to argue from a place of assumed value of the other's position, even if we fundamentally disagree?

The rabbis weren't always good at this themselves. I don't want to paint an idyllic picture. This is hard. Really hard to do – the talmud in Masechet Sanhedrin relates

Sanhedrin 24a:12

R. Oshaya said: The scholars of the Land of Israel treat each other graciously when engaged in debates (Rashi [10th c. France]

סנהדרין כ"ד א:י"ב

א"ר אושעיא מאי דכתיב (זכריה יא, ז) ואקח לי (את) שני מקלות לאחד קראתי נועם ולאחד קראתי חובלים. 'נועם' אלו

adds: [what does this mean?] look into the matter together, and this one corrects the other politely, and the law comes to light). However, the scholars of Babylon injure each other (Rashi: with strong and heated language) when debating.

ת"ח שבארץ ישראל שמנעימין זה לזה בהלכה. 'חובלים' אלו ת"ח שבבבל שמחבילים זה לזה בהלכה (זכריה יא, יג).

A toxic culture of argument can lead to pain and suffering – there is no greater example of this in our tradition than the tale of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish. They were *Bar Plugta* – those best frenemy study partners in Babylonia close to 1800 years ago. They met under... less than great circumstances. Resh Lakish was a marauder and attempted to jump and rob Yochanan – but Yochanan (who was no chump himself) – wrestled Resh Lakish to the ground and told him to become a scholar instead of a brigand. Eventually Resh Lakish married Yochanan's sister and they became the best of friends and intellectual sparring partners. If Yochanan would say “up”, Resh Lakish would have 10 reasons that “down” was the correct answer, and visa-versa. They had a happy and loving and mutually beneficial intellectual partnership for many years... when the incident occurred. One day in the beit midrash, Resh Lakish and Yochanan were arguing about the halachic status of a sharp implement. They disagreed. Instead of listening and respecting Resh Lakish, Yochanan made an ad-hominem attack against his brother in law – saying, in regards to a sharp implement like a knife – “a thief knows his craft”. This broke Resh Lakish's heart – who had spent countless years devoted to Torah study, not thieving – and he subsequently took ill and died. Leaving Yochanan without a bar plugta, brother in law, and best friend... eventually losing his own mind because of the immensity of the loss. He no longer had the intellectual sparring partner he needed to hone his own ideas, and it was all his fault. Here we have a relationship so intimate, so personal – like a marriage almost – a marriage of minds – that was soured once the machloket went from being l'shem shamayyim – for the sake of a greater purpose – and became about petty ideas – and insults. One mistake changed the trajectory of their relationship... and destroyed their lives. It soured their arguments – their machlakot from sacred to profane.

This story is a cautionary tale from our tradition. Here is both an example of the ways in which our discourse can elevate ourselves and those we intellectually contend with – and how it can also bring us down and decimate. Like any great tool – machloket can be wielded to build or to destroy. To inspire or tear down. To push growth or to stymie it. The choice, ultimately is up to us...

And so our in a world where we can hardly agree on anything – from child rearing to Israel, I want to push us to take steps outside of our silo-ed intellectual tribes. It's comfortable and easy to only engage with people who share our opinions. And – it stymies intellectual and spiritual growth. The insights we share in our little silos, in the safety of our algorithms, limit our perspective. They limit our ability to imagine a different world – to engage in the real work of making the world a better place. Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook once wrote in regards to the Jewish spiritual practice of *Machloket* –

...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.

It is hard to judge the arguments of the other without hearing them, giving them space to blossom and examining them from every angle. Conversely, it's difficult to understand the nuances of our own positions without seeing their contours through the eyes of another. Just as the Jewish tradition teaches that there are *shiviim panim latorah* – that there are 70 facets or ways of understanding each word in the Torah – so too are there at least 70 different ways for us to use disagreement to bring us closer to our fellows.

Imagine a world where we use our intellectual differences to bring ourselves closer – as a tool for spiritual growth. Knowing our own boundaries – the conversations we are not willing to entertain AND being willing to engage in productive discomfort to help us better understand the people around us. To help us forge relationships... because that is the fundamental currency of the human experience. As we see in the story of Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan – respectful disagreement can forge relationships that are both intimate and delicate. We need to engage in such work in order to better understand our fellows, ourselves, our world as the words of Ben Zoma in Avot echo through the centuries –

Avot 4:1	
...אֵיזְהוּ חָכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם...	Who is wise? Someone who learns from every person

We need to learn how to be wise again – and begin to embrace intellectual differences for the sake of drawing closer and being in relationship with the wider world. Again, that doesn't mean we lose values – it means understanding them better. We understand ourselves better... and maybe we understand those that we disagree with better. I pray that we are able to take up the mantle of *Machloket*

L'Shem Shamayyim in our lives as a spiritual practice. That we hone that muscle – that we seek to use respectful disagreement as a means to draw us closer to those around us and not as a wedge to divide us. That we each find our Bar Plugta – our holy frenemies to push us ever forwards – to help us refine our ideas and opinions and to be sacred companions in this world. I pray that we are all blessed to be able to make *Machloket* a true spiritual practice for ourselves in the days, months, and years to come.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. Amen