

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### *The Art of Passionate Disagreement*

Often, someone will ask me a question that begins with, “What do Jews think about...” I have a good friend who always gets a kick out of my usual answer. “It depends on the Jew.” The popular joke is, “If you have two Jew, there are at least three opinions.” This is not frivolous humor. It comes from the Talmud. Disputes among Talmudic rabbis were common, and sometimes the arguments crossed generations. The disagreements in the Talmud were often philosophical issues or minute details of rituals and ethical behavior. A few examples:

Regarding the question, “Which is more important, learning or action?” One Talmudic passage (Shabbat 127a) insists that Torah learning is more important than anything. “*The study of Torah is equal to all.*” But Pirke Avot (1:17) states, “*It is not the study that is essential, but the action.*” Then, in the Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 40b) Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon are posed the same question by elders. “*Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: ‘Action is greater.’ Rabbi Akiva answered, saying: ‘Study is greater.’ All the rest agreed with Akiva that study is greater than action because it leads to action.*”

These may seem like unimportant discussions, but these rabbis were framing behavior for generations to come. More important than the final answer was the respectful manner in which discussions took place. Of course, when people are passionate about an issue, it might not always be pleasant. There is a famous Talmudic story (Bava Metzia 59a-b) about whether or not a certain oven was kosher. The acknowledged expert on kashrut, Rabbi Eliezar, insisted it was kosher, but Rabbi Joshua and two rabbis insisted it was not. When Rabbi Eliezar’s powerful persuasions did not make a difference to the other rabbis, he called upon a Voice from Heaven. According to the story, the Heavenly Voice sided with Rabbi Eliezar. Rabbi Joshua basically said (paraphrasing here): “OK. Now it’s three to two. You still lose.” He cited Deuteronomy 30:12 that states that the Torah was given to mankind on earth, and even a Voice from Heaven is not a sufficient veto. And Rabbi Eliezar, a respected sage, was humiliated.

There is a tragic flaw in this story. **The importance of being right over anything else.** While passionate disagreement is the Jewish way, these rabbis lost sight of the issue, and it became more important to win the argument. Not only did they forget about the laws of kashrut and the oven; they forgot about civility.

It is absolutely important to stand up for what we feel is right. But too often, extreme positions take the place of listening to each other, seeing the nuances of another person’s perspective and looking for ways to compromise. Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, who spent several years living in Israel, experienced disagreements between extreme positions in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict first-hand. He wrote a book called, “You don’t have to be wrong for me to be right.” Only when we can look beyond our initial judgments and truly *listen* to other points of view, can we begin to solve disagreements in respectful ways. The Babylonian Talmud

(Eruvim 13b) acknowledges that great teachings come from both the houses of Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai: “*Both schools espouse the words of the living God, but Halakha (law and practice) follows the school of Hillel.*” This was because Hillel was known for humility and Shammai for arrogance. Hillel’s students were known to study Shammai’s points of view before coming to their own conclusions. We are taught “*Those who seek greatness, greatness will flee from them. Those who are patient and humble will succeed.*”

In today’s world, we sadly find many examples of individuals and coalitions who try to succeed by pushing others down, insisting that there is only one right way. Listening to a variety of viewpoints, humbly and respectfully, brings us to understand each other in beautiful ways. Dr. Martin Luther King was known to say, “Love is the only thing that can turn an enemy into a friend.” Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker added, “If we live this way, we’ll have a lot more friends with whom we disagree; but we’ll have a lot fewer enemies.”

L’shalom,

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