

# MACHLOKET L'SHEM SHAMAYIM ARGUMENT FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN

In recent times, people who hold different opinions do not have the opportunity or seek or to discuss their differences. Traditional Judaism, however, has always valued machloket, conflict. For example, the Talmud shares thousands of machlokot, arguments or disagreements among the rabbis, most notably between Rabbis Hillel and Shammai. The rabbis saw engaging in these volatile discussions as a critical part of uncovering truth. The key, however, is to engage in Machloket L'Shem Shamayim, disagreements for the sake of heaven, disagreeing in a constructive way. In contemporary times, we describe this kind of disagreement as debating and focusing on the issue and not making the disagreement personal.

Our first text is from Mishna Avot, often called Pirkei Avot or Ethics of our Fathers. As with all of the Mishna, it was written in about the 3rd century CE in the Land of Israel.

כל מחקת שהיא לשם שמים סופה להתקיים. ואינה לשם שמים אין סופה להתקיים.  
איזה היא מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים? זו מחלוקת הלל ושמאי. ושאינה לשם שמים? זו מחלוקת קרח וכל עדתו.  
(משנה אבות ה:ז)

*Every argument that is for [the sake of] heaven's name, it is destined to endure. 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] for [the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Hillel and Shammai. What is [an example of an argument] not for [the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Korach and all of his congregation. Pirkei Avot 5:17*

The second text is from the commentary of the "Bertinoro", R. Ovadiah Bertinoro, a 16th century Italian commentator.

"כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים סופה להתקיים - כלומר שאנשי המחלוקת ההיא מתקיימים ואינם אובדין"  
(רבי עובדיה מברטנורא, אבות ה:ז)

*[The mishnah says:] Every machloket (conflict) which is l'shem shamayim (for the Bertinoro, Avot 5:17 [The mishnah says:] sake of Heaven), is destined to endure." This means that the people engaged in the conflict will endure and will not be lost. (Bertinoro, Avot 5:17)*

## CONSIDER:

- When is a disagreement or conflict constructive and when does it become destructive?
- What can we learn from the manner with which these discussions evolved?
- What exactly will endure (or continue to exist) after the conflict ends?
- Rabbis Hillel and Shammai often disagreed about issues but continued to respect each other, share meals with each other and not broaden their dispute to make it personal. What can we learn from the concept Machloket L'Shem Shamayim, disagreements for the sake of heaven?

## NEXT STEPS:

- Intentionally, engage in conversations with people who hold different views with you. Remind them (and yourself), you disagree with the person on the issue but not with the person.
- Discuss an issue with someone, or debate a viewpoint you don't agree with and try to understand their viewpoint..
- Participate in lectures where you can learn more about the other side.
- Agree to disagree agreeably and to always treat others with the dignity and respect they deserve.