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Arguing With God?

In Parashat Shemot, we are introduced to Moshe. It is striking that in Moshe's very first encounter with Hashem at the burning bush, he argues with God. Four times Moshe resists Hashem's call to lead Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt. Later, at the end of the parasha, Moshe again uses bold language as he questions Hashem:

לְמֹה הָרְעָתָה לְעַם הַזֶּה לְמֹה זוּ הַשְׁלָחוּתָנוּ: וּמֹאֲזַבְּתִי אֶלְפְּרֻעָה לְדַבָּר בְּשֵׁמֶךָ הָרָע לְעַם הַזֶּה וְהַצֵּלָה לְאַחֲלָתָלָת אֶת-עַמָּךְ:

"Why have You mistreated this people? Why have You sent me? For ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has made things worse for this people, and still You have not saved Your people!" (Shemot 5:22-23)

At first glance, arguing with God may seem sacrilegious. But Moshe is neither the first nor the last in Tanach to do so. Avraham challenges Hashem in his defense of Sodom:

חָלִילָה לְךָ... הַשְׁפֵּט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יִצְשָׁה
טַפְשָׁת?"—“It is unbefitting of You! Shall the Judge of all the earth not act justly?” (Bereishit 18:25)

Yirmiyahu voices the age-old question of theodicy:

מַזְעֵץ דָּרָךְ רְשָׁעִים אֶלְחָתָה?—“Why does the way of the wicked prosper?” (Yirmiyahu 12:1)

Others—Chavakuk, Iyov, many of the prophets—also confront God's justice.

And of course, throughout the Talmud the Rabbis argue constantly. Nearly every daf contains a machloket; Hillel and Shammai seem to disagree on almost everything. How, then, does Judaism view arguments? Is it negative—something to be suppressed—or positive, even holy?

ARGUMENT AS A JEWISH VALUE

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (in *Lessons in Leadership*) cites George Orwell, who wrote: “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.” John Stuart Mill similarly argued that stigmatizing opposing views is a betrayal of freedom. This is profoundly aligned with Judaism. The Talmud famously states in the name of God regarding the debates between the schools of Hillel and Shammai:

“אֲלֹו אֲלֹו דְּבָרֵי אַלְהָם חִימָם”—“These and those are the words of the living God.” (Eruvin 13b)

Judaism sees something sacred in

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argument for two reasons:

1. ONLY GOD SEES ABSOLUTE TRUTH.

We, as finite human beings, perceive only fragments of the whole. Truth contains multiple angles. This is symbolized beautifully in the beginning of Parashat Bereshit where we find the Torah's two creation narratives—each true, yet each reflecting a different perspective.

2. JUSTICE REQUIRES HEARING THE OTHER SIDE.

For justice to exist, both prosecution and defense must speak. This is why Hashem wants Avraham and Moshe to argue—to plead on behalf of others. It is why genuine leadership in Judaism demands the courage to question.

The Netziv writes that the sin of the builders of the Tower of Bavel was their refusal to tolerate disagreement (Ha'amek Davar, Bereishit 11:4). A society without dissent is a society without growth.

The Talmud further teaches that Hillel's opinions became halacha **because** his students were humble and pleasant, and because they taught Shammai's views *before* their own (Eruvin 13b). To reach truth, we must be willing to hear, and even to honor, views that differ from ours.

God Himself models this openness. He chooses prophets who will confront Heaven for the sake of Heaven—those who care so deeply about justice that they are willing to speak boldly to God.

THE COURAGE TO QUESTION —AND THE HUMILITY TO LISTEN

The great paradox of Jewish spirituality is that we become closer to God not by silencing our doubts, but

by bringing them to Him. Judaism does not demand blind acceptance; it demands honest engagement. The first steps of Moshe's leadership are not acts of obedience, but of *conversation*—wrestling, questioning, seeking to understand.

To argue with God, to ask hard questions, is not a sign of weak faith. It is a sign of a relationship strong enough to handle truth.

And yet, the Torah teaches that real argument—**machloket l'shem Shamayim**—is never about victory. It is about vision. It is grounded in humility, the willingness to hear another voice, even when it challenges us.

As we read Parashat Shemot, we are reminded that redemption begins when a person dares to speak honestly to God—and equally, dares to listen deeply to others. If we can bring that same courage and humility into our relationships, our communities, and our spiritual lives, then our arguments will not divide us; they will elevate us. They will become the very conversations through which we draw closer to truth, to one another, and to Hashem.

May we learn to question with integrity, to listen with humility, and to argue always—for the sake of Heaven. ■

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