

Sparring Partners: Our Arguments with God and What We Learn From Them!

Shiyur for Tikkun Leil Shavuot 5781

Prepared for the Eshel Community

מחלוקת לשם השמים

Dr. Sandra Sterling Epstein shulisrose@aol.com

BERUCHIM HABAIM: As we continue to celebrate in our small gatherings, this shiyur is meant to be shared with your friends. There are questions to discuss and texts to facilitate more consideration of the questions. Feel free to go through this thoroughly as a complete unit or choose the parts most meaningful. Shavuot is about our acceptance of Torah and G-d's relationship with us through its words, laws and narratives. We do not always have to accept G-d's agreement with us as a given and in fact, we are taught, we are supposed to argue with G-d ... to find the best in us, the best in G-d and the most meaningful relationship we can fashion in the reality of our lives. Zil Gemor! Let's learn!

A Story: Recently, a student in one of my *shiyurim* I give (this one for young children) reported that he had asked his Rav Beit Sefer if G-d answers when he talks to him. The Rabbi did not indicate an affirmative answer and this disturbed this very young seeker (aged seven years old). He asked me about it and why he should bother praying. I then launched into an entire discussion with the group of first and second graders about how G-d answers in ways that are different than we may understand, not the same as when we have a conversation with a teacher or a parent. I asked hi if he was sure that the Rabbi said that G-d does not answer; he was not sure but he was confused. We then talked about faith and that meaningful conversations and spiritual communication is not always so simple and visible. So it is with us – we in the Eshel community, not unlike other, may often ask “Where is G-d?” or “Why did G-d make me this way?” Do we hear G-d's answers? Are we listening? Is G-d answering us or leaving us to figure it out with G-d's silent guidance on the side? Or are there other possibilities? There is no answer that is definitive --- the quandary and discussion continue for all of us, children and adults. In that discussion, perhaps it is the questions that have more impact than the answers.

Question Set #1:

- Do you have a story of your own like the one above to share?
- What is the purpose of these questions and discussions that do NOT have definitive answers? [Think intentionally about this and other questions for our Eshel community.]
- How and what do/can we learn from them?

Source #1: Shabbat 31a: Hillel's patience - how we engage in discourse and answer questions

The Sages taught in a *baraita*: A person should always be patient like Hillel and not impatient like Shammai. The Gemara related: There was an incident involving two people who wagered with each other and said: Anyone who will go and aggravate Hillel to the point

that he reprimands him, **will take four-hundred zuz. One of them said: I will aggravate him. That day** that he chose to bother Hillel **was Shabbat eve, and Hillel was washing his hair. He went and passed the entrance to Hillel's house** and in a demeaning manner **said: Who here is Hillel, who here is Hillel?** Hillel **wrapped himself** in a dignified garment **and went out to greet him. He said to him: My son, what do you seek? He said to him: I have a question to ask. Hillel said to him: Ask, my son, ask.** The man asked him: **Why are the heads of Babylonians oval?** He was alluding to and attempting to insult Hillel, who was Babylonian. **He said to him: My son, you have asked a significant question.** The reason is **because they do not have clever midwives.** They do not know how to shape the child's head at birth.

That man **went and waited one hour**, a short while, **returned** to look for Hillel, **and said: Who here is Hillel, who here is Hillel?** Again, Hillel **wrapped himself and went out to greet him. Hillel said to him: My son, what do you seek? The man said to him: I have a question to ask. He said to him: Ask, my son, ask.** The man asked: **Why are the eyes of the residents of Tadmor bleary [terutot]?** Hillel **said to him: My son, you have asked a significant question.** The reason is **because they live among the sands** and the sand gets into their eyes.

Once again the man **went, waited one hour, returned, and said: Who here is Hillel, who here is Hillel?** Again, **he, Hillel, wrapped himself and went out to greet him. He said to him: My son, what do you seek? He said to him: I have a question to ask. He said to him: Ask, my son, ask.** The man asked: **Why do Africans have wide feet?** Hillel **said to him: You have asked a significant question.** The reason is **because they live in marshlands** and their feet widened to enable them to walk through those swampy areas.

אמר לו שאלות הרבה יש לי לשאול ומתירא אני שמא תכעוס נתעטף וישב לפני

That man **said to him: I have many more questions to ask, but I am afraid lest you get angry. Hillel wrapped himself and sat before him, and he said to him: All of the questions that you have to ask, ask them.** The man got angry and **said to him: Are you Hillel whom they call the Nasi of Israel? He said to him: Yes. He said to him: If it is you, then may there not be many like you in Israel. Hillel said to him: My son, for what reason do you say this? The man said to him: Because I lost four hundred zuz because of you. Hillel said to him: Be vigilant of your spirit** and avoid situations of this sort.

Question Set #2: The man lost his money in a bet because Hillel did not get angry and patiently answered his questions. Hillel did not act as the man expected.

- Were they both in the conversation for the same reason or did they have different reasons for engaging? What did the man want? What was Hillel's goal?
- When we engage with Rabbis, parents, and other members of our community, why do we ask our questions?
- What answers are we looking for?
- What happens when the response or reaction is not what we want or need or were expecting?
- What do we take away from these conversations?

Source #2: Eruvin 13b Hillel and Shammai are both correct because

אלו ואלו דברי אלקים חיים

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Shmuel, “For three years there were disputes between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, while Beit Shammai claimed ‘The halacha is like us’ and Beit Hillel claimed ‘The halacha is like us’. Then a *bat kol* (voice from Heaven) declared, ‘**Both are the words of the living G-d**, but the law is like Beit Hillel’. Since, however, both are the words of the living G-d, why did Beit Hillel merit that the halacha be established like them? Because they were kindly and patient, and they taught their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and, moreover, they positioned the teachings of Beit Shammai even before those of their own.”

Question Set #3:

- What do you gain by discussing a difficult topic with someone who differs from you in their approach?
- How can we learn from the discussion and work to not shut it down?
- What approach from Hillel in this text can we apply to our discussions and interactions with others in representing who we authentically are and simultaneously showing we hear and value them and their position as well?

Source #3: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Covenant and Conversation, Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009.

I have become increasingly concerned about the assault on free speech taking place throughout the West, particularly in university campuses. This is being done in the name of “safe space,” that is, space in which you are protected against hearing views which might cause you distress, “trigger warnings” and “micro-aggressions,” that is, any remark that someone might find offensive even if no offence is meant.

So far has this gone that at the beginning of the 2017 academic year, students at an Oxford College banned the presence of a representative of the Christian Union on the grounds that some might find their presence alienating and offensive. Increasingly, speakers with controversial views are being disinvited: the number of such incidents on American college campuses rose from 6 in 2000 to 44 in 2016.

Undoubtedly this entire movement was undertaken for the highest of motives, to protect the feelings of the vulnerable. That is a legitimate ethical concern. Jewish law goes to extremes in condemning *lashon hara*, hurtful or derogatory speech, and the sages were careful to use what they called *lashon sagi nahor*, euphemism, to avoid language that people might find offensive.

But a safe space is not one in which you silence dissenting views. To the contrary: it is one in which you give a respectful hearing to views opposed to your own, knowing that your

views too will be listened to respectfully. That is academic freedom, and it is essential to a free society. As George Orwell said, “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”

John Stuart Mill likewise wrote that one of the worst offences against freedom is “to stigmatize those who hold the contrary opinion as bad and immoral men.” That is happening today in institutions that are supposed to be the guardians of academic freedom. We are coming perilously close to what Julian Benda called, in 1927, “The treason of the intellectuals,” in which he said that academic life had been degraded to the extent that it had allowed itself to become an arena for “the intellectual organization of political hatreds.”

What is striking about Judaism, and we see ... that *argument and the hearing of contrary views is of the essence of the religious life*. Moses argues with God. That is one of the most striking things about him. He argues with God on their first encounter at the burning bush. Four times he resists God’s call to lead the Israelites to freedom, until God finally gets angry with him (Ex. 3:1–4:7). More significantly, at the end of the parsha he says to God:

“Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Why did You send me? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all.” (Ex. 5:22-23).

This is extraordinary language for a human being to use to God. But Moses was not the first to do so. The first was Abraham, who said, on hearing of God’s plan to destroy the cities of the plain, “*Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?*” (Gen. 18:25).

Similarly, Jeremiah, posing the age-old question of why bad things happen to good people and good things to bad people, asked: “*Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?*” (Jer. 12:1). In the same vein, Habakkuk challenged God: “*Why do You tolerate the treacherous? Why are You silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?*” ... Heaven, in short, is not a safe space in the current meaning of the phrase. To the contrary: *God loves those who argue with G-d* – so it seems from Tanakh.

... justice presupposes the principle that in Roman law is called *audi alteram partem*, “hear the other side.” That is why God wants an Abraham, a Moses, a Jeremiah and a Job to challenge God, sometimes to plead for mercy or, as in the case of Moses ... to urge God to act swiftly in defense of the B’nai Yisrael. Both the case for the prosecution and the defense must be heard if justice is to be done and seen to be done.

The pursuit of truth and justice require the freedom to disagree. The Netziv argued that it was the prohibition of disagreement that was the sin of the builders of Babel. What we need, therefore, is not “safe spaces” but rather, civility, that is to say, giving a respectful hearing to views with which we disagree....

Question Set #4:

- How can we all work to create safe spaces for each other, ourselves and those who may be challenged by what we bring to the table?
- How can we come to that table with respect and honor, making others want to “hear the other side,” that is OUR side?
- How are we responding to G-d’s “desire” for us to respectfully challenge others? Maybe even G-d?

Source #4 Baba Metzia 59a – 59b

תנור של עכנאי

We learned elsewhere: If one cut [the surface of the oven] into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile: R. Eliezer declared it clean, and the Sages declared it unclean; and this was the oven of 'Aknai.¹ Why [the oven of] 'Aknai? — Said Rab Judah in Samuel's name: [It means] that they encompassed it with arguments² as a snake, and proved it unclean. It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument,³ but they did not accept them. Said he to them: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, four hundred cubits. 'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,' they retorted. Again he said to them: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!' Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards — 'No proof can be brought from a stream of water,' they rejoined. Again he urged: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what have ye to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honour of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honour of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!' Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halachah* agrees with him!' But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven.'⁴ What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline.⁵

נצחוני בני נצחוני בני

R. Nathan met Elijah⁶ and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? — He laughed [with joy], he replied, saying, '**My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.**' It was said: On that day all objects which R. Eliezer had declared clean were brought and burnt in fire.⁷ Then they took a vote and excommunicated him.⁸ Said they, 'Who shall go and inform him?' 'I will go,' answered R. Akiba, 'lest an unsuitable person go and inform him, and thus destroy the whole world.'⁹ What did R. Akiba do? He donned black garments and wrapped himself in black,¹⁰ and sat at a distance of four cubits from him. 'Akiba,' said R. Eliezer to him, 'what has particularly happened to-day?'¹¹ 'Master,' he replied, 'it appears to me that thy

companions hold aloof from thee.' Thereupon he too rent his garments, put off his shoes, removed [his seat] and sat on the earth, whilst tears streamed from his eyes.¹² The world was then smitten: a third of the olive crop, a third of the wheat, and a third of the barley crop. Some say, the dough in women's hands swelled up.

Question Set #5:

- What is the purpose of **winning** an argument? Is it always a real win or something else?
- Is the victory here for all parties or not?
- What is different between this narrative of a disagreement and the one above between Hillel and Shammai?
- Which outcome is desirable for you?

Source #5: Abraham Kaplan, *The Jewish Argument with God*, Commentary Magazine, October, 1980

Advising and exhorting God is extraordinary enough. The Jew has gone further, accusing God of injustice. According to the Midrash, Moses, denied entry to the Promised Land, reproaches God: “**Why do You act thus toward me? It was You who first approached me. . . . Having made me great, will You now degrade me?**” God replies, “I have sworn it.” Moses says: “Master of the Universe, did You not break Your own oath when You wanted to?” ... In a memorable Hassidic anecdote, a congregant declares on Yom Kippur; “True, I have sinned; but what about You, O God? What about the suffering of innocents, unjust persecutions, the triumph of evil? Let’s call it quits—You forgive me, O God, and I will forgive You!” To which Levi Isaac is said to have responded, “No, no! You let God off too easy!”

The idea that God has something to answer for, not only a prayer to respond to, is more than an aberration of the Jewish religious spirit, though it is scarcely known in other theisms.. The demand for an acceptable answer is most notably the theme of the book of Job. “I desire to reason with God,” Job says outright. God acknowledges at the outset the injustice of His treatment of Job, saying to Satan: “He still holds fast his integrity, though you moved me to destroy him without cause.” Such an admission is so extraordinary that the Talmud comments: “Were it not expressly stated in Scripture, we would not dare to say it.”

The teaching is not unequivocal: Job was also condemned for his presumptuousness. Said one of the Talmudic sages: “Job sought to turn the dish upside down”; and another: “Dust should be put in the mouth of Job, because he makes himself an equal of Heaven; is there a servant who argues with his master?” In the case of Jewish servants, the answer, plainly, is yes. In another context, the Talmud is explicit in prohibiting such complaints: “If a man says that the Holy One, blessed be God, is lax in the execution of justice, his life shall be outlawed.” Yet the tradition is deeply rooted. Though the outcome of the complaint must not be prejudged, God Himself invites the argument: “Come now and let us reason together” [often appears in classical Jewish texts.]

... King, priest, and prophet saw the Hebrews as an obstinate and stubborn people. God described them as “stiff-necked”; in pleading for them, Moses himself reveals the same trait. “God said to Moses: **‘I have seen this people, and behold it is a stiff-necked people. Now let Me alone, that My wrath may wax hot against them. . . .’** And Moses besought the Lord his God and said, **‘Lord, why does Your wrath wax hot against Your people? . . . Why should the Egyptians say He brought them forth only to slay them in the mountains . . .?’**” Moses refuses to acquiesce in silence, even in the face of God’s explicit reproach, as though he knows God’s will better than it is conveyed in God’s own words....

Judaism begins with the moralization of the cosmological god. The story of the Flood is anticipated in the epic of Gilgamesh. There, however, both the destruction of the world and the saving of Gilgamesh are acts of arbitrary displeasure and favor. In contrast, Noah’s Flood came about because “God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth,” while “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation.” The cosmological and the ethical are united in God’s holiness, which combines power and virtue, justice and mercy.

... Morality is the link between man and God, having its seat in what is divine in man, and being intrinsic to divinity itself [and it is this morality that should inform our communication with each other]

In the argument with God, Judaism is invoking God against God’s self, justice against power, the ethical deity against the cosmological deity. The conflict within man between his divine and animal natures is projected onto the deity. God can be an advocate against Himself. According to the Talmud, G-d even engages in prayer: **“May it be My will that My mercy may overcome My anger . . . so that I may deal with My children in kindness going above the limits of the law.”** [BERACHOT 7a]

Here we see that God is argumentative and the human being created BeTzelem Elokim is meant to be as well. This is part of the conscience that identifies the human being; now the question is how do we utilize this capacity to save and help, not destroy and polarize? (SSE)

... Philo of Alexandria and Maimonides saw the image of the divine in man’s rational nature. Scripture points instead to a resemblance in the capacity for moral discrimination: “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. . . .” It is this knowledge on which man rests his claims against the deity, calling on God’s own moral nature as a witness for the plaintiff...

Question Set #6:

- What models of argumentation with G-d do we see here?
- What are the injustices, perceived and/or real, that bring about such accusations and pushback?
- When have YOU argued with G-d?
- Are we supposed to argue with G-d? Does G-d expect this of us?

Source #6: From Tzvi Freeman, www.chabad.org

We have a relationship with God. We are allowed some outrage. It's expected of us. If you have nothing to do with one another you are afraid of putting your feelings out in the open. But when you trust one another, when you are bonded together as one, when you have traveled an arduous journey together for four thousand years, when you have walked through fire and storm, defied the sword and the torch for Him, spilled your blood again and again for Him, risen to heaven in noxious smoke simply because you belong to Him, then you have the right, the need to yell out, to demand, "What's going on?! How long can you keep this up for?"

Source #7: Mishlei and Tehilim with Rashi

מִוֹת וְחַיִּים, בְּיַד - כָּא
לְשׁוֹן; וְאֵהָרְיָהּ, יֹאכַל פְּרִיָּהּ. **18. 21** Death and life are in the power of the tongue; and they
that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.

Metzudat David: If one talks words of Torah, that one will live; but if one speaks words of slander, that one will perish.

Rashi: One who loves (cherishes) one's tongue and is accustomed to having it speak words of Torah is rewarded in this world.

In Tehilim 39: 2 – 3, we read:

אָמַרְתִּי-- אֲשַׁמְרָה דְרָכַי, ב
מִחֲטָא בְלִשׁוֹנִי:
אֲשַׁמְרָה לְפִי מִחֲסוֹם-- בְּעַד רָשָׁע
לְנִגְדִי.
נְאֻלַּמְתִּי דוּמְיָהּ, הִקְשִׁיתִי ג
מִטּוֹב; וּכְאַבִּי נִעְפָּר.
2 I said: 'I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my
tongue;
I will keep guard upon my mouth, while the wicked is before
me.'
3 I was quieted (muted) with silence; I held my peace, had no
comfort; and my pain was held in check.

Source #8: ARGUING WITH GOD, TALMUDIC DISCOURSE, AND THE JEWISH COUNTERMODEL: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF ARGUMENTATION

By David A. Frank (2004)

... Emmanuel Levinas and Chaim Perelman [are] important twentieth-century Jewish thinkers who provide argumentation theorists with a Jewish-influenced outlook on argumentative reason, one that can complement the more humane impulses of classical thought... God [i]s an advocate who develops character and argumentative competence over time in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, **unlike the arguments in many Western texts, those in the Hebrew Bible are often indeterminate, confused, and can yield a host of reasonable but incompatible**

interpretations. ... [There is a] genesis of argument in the Jewish tradition consider[ed] as foundational to Jewish thought – the arguments made to God by Abraham, Moses, and Job, and God's responses...

וידבר ה'

...Speaking, or **davar**, is the touchstone notion in the Hebrew Bible, which Handelman defines as speech and thought, word and thing. In this tradition, there is no distinction between symbol and reality: "for the Hebrew mind, the essential reality of a table was [and is] the word of God, not any idea of the table as in the Platonic view" (Handelman, Slayers 32). In contrast, the classical tradition dissociates the word from the thing (the map is not the territory) and privileges what Aristotle termed "First Being" (ousia). True knowledge exists in this tradition beyond the symbol, and Being is grasped through a silent speculation that transcends speech and noise. There is no Hebrew word for Being because "[o]ne does not pass beyond the name as an arbitrary sign towards a non verbal vision of the thing, God's arguments become speech acts, creative interventions in the world of experience. The Hebrew God established speech{davar} rather than Being (ousici) as the primary term....

The God of the Hebrew Bible appears fallible, -- APPROACHABLE (imminent and transcendent) enters into and is constrained by human time. In Greek myth, humans do not engage in genuine argument with Zeus, The Christian tradition submerges the arguing-with-God tradition in order to emphasize contrition. Where the Hebrew Bible has Job declaring "[God] may well slay me; I may have no hope; Yet I will argue my case before Him," the King James version bowdlerizes the passage with this translation that eliminates argument: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him" ... By arguing, God "enters time and is changed by experience [and models this for humans].

...To God's credit, argumentation leads God to reduce the scope of God's claims in argument with Abraham, change mood and the decision to act in response to arguments posed by Moses, and acknowledge defeat in argumentative exchange with Job, By engaging in argument, God reveals an open-mindedness, an openness I would extend to God's emotional state as well.

... The choice of argument rather than physical power to adjudicate conflict creates... a rhetorical "wedge" between arguers. **This wedge creates a buffer of consciousness between the argument and its judgment.** For example, if God did not choose to abide by the conditions of argument, God would issue commands that would pierce consciousness and produce instant action. Instead, God's arguments with Abraham, Moses, and Job make claims open to conscious scrutiny and criticism; freedom reigns. Freedom is denied in formal logic and the apodictic reasoning ... in totalitarian movements ... One can indeed try to obtain a particular result either by the use of violence or by speech aimed at securing the adherence of minds.

It is in terms of this alternative that the opposition between spiritual freedom and constraint is most clearly seen. The use of argumentation implies that one has renounced resorting to force alone, that value is attached to gaining the adherence of one's interlocutor by means of reasoned persuasion, and that one is not regarding him as an object, but appealing to his free judgment. Recourse to argumentation assumes the establishment of a community of minds, which, while it lasts, excludes the use of violence.

Source # 9: Adapted from *Hilchot Lashon Hara in Sefer Chafetz Chaim*

The 7 conditions to satisfy before speaking in a way that could be harmful to others (Lashon HaRa)

1. The speaker must have witnessed the incident or situation himself, rather than knowing about it from rumor. (If he has only heard about the incident, then he must verify its authenticity firsthand.)
2. The speaker should reflect thoroughly, not hastily concluding something is theft or damage or any other offense such as slander or lying, that the action in question is truly a violation according to Halacha [and/or the prevailing legal code, for our purposes].
3. The speaker should first approach the transgressor or person with a differing (wrong?) view privately, and state his case with gentle language (such that the other person would be inclined to listen), because perhaps this can have an impact and inspire the person to [correct his error]. If the transgressor does not listen, then the speaker should alert the public of the individual's guilt or misdeed.
4. The description of the wrong should not be exaggerated [for "effect" or any other reason].
5. The speaker must have pure intentions in reporting what they are saying. The speaker should not – Heaven forbid – enjoy his friend's (the transgressor's) disgrace, nor act out of a previous hatred he felt for the person. [Note prayer we read at the beginning]
6. If the purpose of speaking the Lashon Hara (e.g. causing the person to repent, warning the community to stay away from such activity) can be achieved in another way rather than speaking Lashon Hara [or excessive and public argumentation], it is forbidden to speak Lashon Hara.
7. By speaking Lashon Hara, the transgressor should not be caused more damage than would be appropriate as determined by a court of Jewish law reviewing the case. [We could, for our purposes, apply this to the court of the land as well.]

And, the Chafetz Chaim asks us to consider what we are saying, to whom we are saying it, when we are speaking and what purpose we hope to achieve.

How would following this pattern potentially change the way we argue and disagree?

Summation Questions:

- What do we learn about the permissibility of argumentation with G-d? With those who differ from us?
- What *rules of engagement* should we use when we are arguing with another person? With G-d?
- What argument do you want to put before G-d from your own life and how can you best articulate it?
- How can doing this assist us in considering how we approach others in our lives to state our point and not have the conversation shut down?