

Argue for the Sake of Heaven

“Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven, its end will endure. But if it’s not for the sake of heaven, its end will not endure. Which is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? That’s the dispute of Hillel and Shammai. And which isn’t for the sake of Heaven? That’s the dispute of Korah and all his gang” (Avot 5:17).¹

This quote is from the Mishnah (a collection of Jewish oral traditions which came to be written down in the second century of the common era) and it refers to a famous dispute in Jewish history between two esteemed sages: Hillel and Shammai. Both were insightful and wise in matters of interpreting the Torah, however their approaches differed. Shammai and his followers adhered to a restrictive interpretation of the law, whereas Hillel and his disciples favoured a more flexible one. While the disciples of each school clashed fiercely, over time the rabbinic consensus favoured the school of Hillel. Even so, it was not a simple matter of ruling that, “Hillel is right and Shammai is wrong.” In fact, a famous story handed down in Jewish tradition tells how a divine voice went forth saying, “The words of Hillel and the words of Shammai are both the words of the living God, but the law is according to the school of Hillel.”

Why was Hillel favoured? According to tradition it was because Hillel and his disciples were kind, humble and inclusive, not hesitating to teach Shammai’s rulings as well as their own. While settling the dispute in favour of one school, it was recognized that the other, too, had merit, and that the community was best served by respecting the healthy tension between diverse insights. It is this constructive tension that the Mishnah describes as being ‘for the sake of heaven.’ It is a tension that sensitises us to the complexities of life and helps us to resist glib answers where deeper searching is in order. This kind of dispute has enduring fruits; it takes us forward.

What, then, is a dispute ‘not’ for the sake of heaven? It is one driven by self-interest; one that takes us nowhere. This, say the sages, was the problem with the famous rebellion triggered by ‘Korah and his gang’ in Numbers 16. During the Israelites’ long desert trek, Korah wasn’t the only one to object to Moses’ leadership. Why, then, did he meet with a particularly tragic end? The problem was not that he objected, but the selfish and divisive spirit in which he went about it.

These stories and commentaries hold wisdom for today. Conflicts within our families and Church communities can be counter-productive, revealing more arrogance and fear than certainty and truth. Then again, some of our debates capture lifegiving questions, tantalizing paradoxes, and the very genius of the term ‘catholic’, namely the capacity to embrace the whole—unity amidst plurality.

As God’s people, may we approach our disagreements with the maturity of Hillel. May we seek wisdom in the views of the ‘other’ as much as our own, and find the delicate balance between resolute patience and prophetic insistence. Like Hillel and Shammai, at times we clash fiercely. Robust opinions will be delivered with passion. Bring it on! We don’t want a Church of wimps too polite to say anything ‘controversial.’ But let us do this respectfully, without sarcasm or arrogance, without behaviour that belittles a brother or a sister. May we develop a profound humility that keeps us listening, wondering and probing a graced mystery that is beyond us all and which, even if expressed in the best categories we can muster today, will find richer expression in time to come. •

1. Quoted in Shai Cherry, *Torah Through Time* (Philadelphia, 2007), 154.

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