



# Living in Dispute

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## Parashat Korah 5786

This *parashah* focuses on the leadership and religious dispute that erupts between Korah and his assembly and Moshe and Aharon. Seemingly, the *parashah* rules in favor of one side—that of Moshe and Aharon—against Korah's claim. It could easily be extrapolated from this drama that disputes are harmful, that they create violence and division, and that what God really wants for us is total unity behind our leadership.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot disagrees. Instead of reading Parashat Korah as a definitive statement by the Torah against the very existence of disputes, the Mishnah chooses to understand the story as a paradigm of a **problematic** dispute—that stands in contrast to a proper, worthy dispute within human society. Avot gives this sharp expression:

### משנה אבות ה'ז

כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, סופה להתקיים. ושאינה לשם שמים, אין סופה להתקיים.  
אי זו היא מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת הלל ושמיאי.  
ושאינה לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת קרח וכל עדתו.

### Mishnah Avot 5:17

Any dispute (*mahloket*) that is for the sake of heaven—its end is to endure; but that which



is not for the sake of heaven—its end is not to endure.

And what is a dispute that is for the sake of heaven? This is the dispute of Hillel and Shammai.

And that is not for the sake of heaven? This is the dispute of Korah and all his assembly.

This *mishnah* does not merely distinguish between types of disputes; it offers an entire worldview on life. What is the meaning of “its end is to endure”? And what does this imply about the way we live, given that one of the characteristics of life is that we are people who disagree with one another?

### A dispute that sees a future

Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerondi,<sup>1</sup> in his commentary to Pirkei Avot, offers a radical reading of the *mishnah*:

#### רבינו יונה אבות ה"ז

'כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים סופה להתקיים' הכוונה שלעולם יתקיימו במחלוקת והיום יחלוקו בדבר א' למחר בדבר אחר ומחלוקת יהיה קיים ונמשך ביניהם כל ימי חייהם ולא עוד אלא שאורך ימים ושנות חיים יוסיפו להם.

#### Rabbeinu Yonah to Avot 5:17

“Any dispute that is for the sake of heaven—its end is to endure”—this means that they will always endure in dispute. Today, they will dispute about one thing, tomorrow another—but dispute will still remain and continue between them for their entire lives. And not only that, but length of days and years of life will be added (*yosifu*) for them.

According to this reading, “its end is to endure” is not an end, but a continuation. A dispute

<sup>1</sup> Catalonia (c. 1210-1263).

for the sake of heaven does not strive to be resolved—it strives to continue, to endure, to live. Those who disagree today will continue to disagree tomorrow, perhaps on other subjects, perhaps in different ways—but the very existence of the dispute becomes part of the fabric of their lives.

Particularly surprising is the connection Rabbeinu Yonah makes between dispute and life itself: “Length of days and years of life will be added for them.” This is based closely on a verse from the Book of Proverbs:

#### משלי ג:א-ב

<sup>1</sup>בְּנִי תוֹרַתִּי אֵל תִּשְׁכַּח...: <sup>2</sup>כִּי אַרְךָ יָמִים וְשָׁנוֹת חַיִּים וְשָׁלוֹם יוֹסִיפוּ לָךְ:

#### Proverbs 3:1-2

<sup>1</sup>My child, my Torah do not forget! ... <sup>2</sup>For length of days and years of life and peace will be added for you.

The verse attributes longevity to Torah and *mitzvot*, but in the context of Rabbeinu Yonah’s commentary, a bold possibility emerges: the dispute itself, when it is for the sake of heaven, becomes a source of life. It is not just a metaphor for intellectual or spiritual vitality, but an actual condition for continued existence.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, a dispute that is not for the sake of heaven is a dispute without continuation. It is a one-time, final event, one that leads to an end. Rabbeinu Yonah continues,

‘ושאינה לשום שמים אין סופה להתקיים’ רק במחלוקת הראשון יספו יתמו ושם ימותו כמחלוקת של קרח.

<sup>2</sup> This interpretation is perhaps also based on the wordplay created between “destined to endure” (*sofah lehitkayem*) and “will be added to them” (*yosifu lahem*), and the phonetic similarity between “end” (*sof*) and “addition” (*hosafah*).

“But that which is not for the sake of heaven—its end is not to endure”—only the original dispute will end (*yas’fu*)<sup>3</sup> and cease, and there they will die—like the dispute of Korah.

Rabbeinu Yonah hints here at the language of the verse in the story of the spies: “בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה: יָמָם יָמָתוּ וְלַיְלָה יָמוּתוּ - In this wilderness they will cease, and there they will die” (Numbers 14:35). There is a sharp distinction here: a dispute for the sake of heaven creates time—a future, continuity, possibility. A dispute not for the sake of heaven closes time—bringing about an end, stagnation, and loss.

Therefore, accepting the idea that “its end is to endure” means accepting a world where a dispute is not resolved, and accepting a future that is not free of disagreements, and is even dependent on the ability to live with them. The future, in a certain sense, belongs to those who are capable of containing the reality of dispute and living it.

The Maharal,<sup>4</sup> in his commentary to Pirkei Avot, sharpens this idea through a cosmic metaphor:

#### דֶּרֶךְ חַיִּים הֵיטָז

כי אף אש ומים הם בנושא האחד, שהוא העולם... אמנם מה שיש קיום לאש ולמים אף שהם הפכים... כי השם יתברך... הוא סבה לשני הפכים... ולפיכך המחלוקת שהוא לשם שמים... אף כי הם הפכים... מכל מקום מצד השם יתברך... הם אחד.

#### Derekh Hayyim to Avot 5:16

For even fire and water are really one thing, which is the world... indeed, fire and water coexist even though they are opposite... because Blessed God... is the cause for both opposites. ... And therefore, a dispute that is for the sake of heaven... even though they are opposites... nevertheless from the perspective of Blessed God... they are one.

<sup>3</sup> Now the word play is based on the similar *sofah* meaning “its end” and the use of the root פ.ס.י. to mean “continue” (e.g., Deuteronomy 19:20). A *mahloket* where *sofah* will not endure is one that does not *yoisif*.

<sup>4</sup> R. Yehudah Loew of Prague (1522-1609).

The world contains opposites—fire and water, permitted and forbidden, impure and pure. By themselves, opposites cannot dwell together. Yet the very fact that they coexist points to a single source that contains them, and to one world in which they exist.

A dispute for the sake of heaven, then, is not merely tolerance toward a multiplicity of opinions; it is an acknowledgment that the multiplicity itself stems from a profound unity, one that strives toward creation and life. Fire and water coexist in one world and, similarly, a dispute for the sake of heaven is a state in which the disputants coexist in one world. They do not strive for the erasure of the other, but accept as a given the existence of the one who disagrees with them, as part of creation, an element of life. Life means shared existence.

### Dispute for *tikkun olam*

The search for the roots and essence of dispute leads our Sages to the story of the creation of the world. On the second day, the phrase “it was good” (*ki tov*), appearing in every other day of creation, is not stated, and this *midrash* wonders why.

#### בראשית רבה ד:ו

רבי חנינא אומר שבו נבראת מחלקת, שנאמר: "ויהי מבדיל בין מים למים" (בראשים א:ו) ... אם מחלקת שהיא לתקונו של עולם ולישבו, אין בה כי טוב, מחלקת שהיא לערבבו על אחת כמה וכמה.

#### Bereishit Rabbah 4:6

R. Hanina says: Because on it division (*mahloket*) was created, as it is said, “Let it separate between water and water” (Genesis 1:6). ... And if division for creating/establishing/fixing (*tikkun*) and settling the world does not have “it was good,” division that is for its destruction—all the more so!

The *midrash* identifies the second day—the day without “it was good”—as the day when

division or separation was created in order to make the sky and the sea: “let it separate waters from waters.” The Maharzu<sup>5</sup> in his commentary to this *midrash* explains that *mahloket* is a division, a separation, the creation of distinct spaces and groups.

While the *midrash* clarifies that there is no declaration of “good” in this case, there is nevertheless a division that is “for creating/establishing/fixing the world.” The division, the separation, the distinction, the dispute—they are all not necessarily negative; they all order the world. They are a prerequisite for creation and for a functioning world. They enable existence.<sup>6</sup> From this, a subtle distinction arises: there is a dispute that is purely division, and there is a dispute that is a condition for existence and partnership. There is a dispute that dismantles, and there is a dispute that organizes space where different people live. Without the ability to live with those who disagree with me, there is no life.

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We live in a society saturated with tensions and disputes. There are moments when I wish everyone would think like me. That the world would align according to my understanding, that voices would unite, that gaps would disappear.

But the Rabbinic reflection on dispute based on our *parashah* offers a completely different perspective: it suggests thinking of dispute not as a failure, but as a fundamental characteristic of human existence, of Jewish life, of our very being in the world. Not only does dispute exist—it even receives a principled status. It is not a bug in the system, but an essential feature within it. It is not a malfunction to be fixed, but a condition to be understood

<sup>5</sup> R. Ze'ev Wulf Einhorn (Poland, 1792-1862).

<sup>6</sup> In Rabbeinu Yonah's commentary, which we saw above, he quotes a verse from Proverbs but seemingly skips one word: *shalom* (peace). Perhaps this offers an explanation: even though *mahloket* allows for existence, this reality is not crowned with the phrase *ki tov*. Because of this *midrash*, *mahloket* challenges the simple concept and reality of peace.



and lived within.

If dispute is a condition for existence, how do we live within it? A dispute whose end is to endure demands certain psychological and social traits: listening, patience, and a willingness to remain in relationship even without agreement. Perhaps even more than that: it demands trust. Not only trust in myself, but trust in the one who disagrees with me. This is a trust that is not naive: I do not assume that the other is as right as I am, but I assume that they have a place in the world, that they too have a future.

The space created is not hierarchical: there is no one side that is defined as inferior. Both sides are required to know each other deeply, not only as abstract positions but as complete identities. And perhaps, the ability to say, “I do not agree with you—and yet I stay; I do not have to choose either me or you,” not only acknowledges the complexity of a world where opposites stem from one source, but also cultivates the possibility of closeness and intimacy that is unique to disagreement.

