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Are Zionists and Anti-Zionists Arguing for the Sake of Heaven?

What makes a Jewish argument?



IS IT ANTISEMITIC to be anti-Zionist? The question has been unavoidable since the Hamas attack of October 7. For most American Jews, protesters who chant “from the river to the sea” are ipso facto antisemitic: What could be more hostile to Jews than calling for the destruction of the world’s only Jewish state? Yet the opponents of Israel are quick to reply that they can hardly be antisemitic when their ranks include groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) and IfNotNow, who insist that their anti-Zionism is actually an expression of Jewish values. “We organize our people and we resist Zionism because we love Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism,” declares JVP on its website, under the heading “Our Core Values.” Some of the most prominent anti-Zionist writers, such as Peter Beinart and Daniel Boyarin, are knowledgeable and observant Jews.

These divisions are testing a principle that, in ordinary times, Jews tend to celebrate without thinking too much about: that Judaism doesn't merely tolerate disagreement but encourages it. "In Judaism, argument is not an accident but of the essence," wrote Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. On the Reform movement's official website, Rabbi Jonathan Prosnit says the same thing: "Jewish tradition — and much of Jewish life — is built on argumentation and disagreement." But what makes for a Jewish argument?

In celebrating diversity of opinion, these modern rabbis carry on an ancient tradition. The Talmud is the source of Jewish law, but it is not a law code; rather, it is a record of legal debates, in which dissenting views and minority opinions are recorded as scrupulously as those that prevail. When the Talmudic sage Reish Lakish died, we learn in Bava Metzia 84a, his study partner Rabbi Yochanan missed their disagreements: "When I would state a matter, he would raise 24 difficulties against me, and I would answer him with 24 answers," and so their understanding of Torah was broadened. Yochanan complained that his new study partner simply agreed with him all the time.

But there are disagreements and then there are disagreements. Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan loved arguing with each other, but neither of them would have engaged in debate with Elisha ben Abuya, the Talmud's enigmatic rabbi-turned-heretic. Elisha experienced a crisis of faith when he saw the angel Metatron seated on a throne in Heaven, a privilege that he thought was reserved for God alone. "Perhaps," he wondered, "there are two authorities" in the universe — an idea so contrary to Jewish monotheism that the Gemara is reluctant even to quote it, prefacing Elisha's words with the disclaimer "chas v'shalom," the equivalent of "God forbid" (Chagiga 15a). Having gone astray in thought, Elisha soon went astray in deed as well, committing sexual sins and riding a horse on Shabbat.

Elisha ben Abuya is referred to in the Talmud as "Acher" (the Other).

The nickname was bestowed by a prostitute who could not believe that the man who hired her was the same person as the renowned sage. But it also clearly expresses the idea that there is a limit to the kinds of disagreement Judaism can embrace. At a certain point, argument *about* Judaism turns into argument *against* Judaism, and the arguer is no longer considered a Jew but an Other — a heretic, a renegade, a traitor.

Who decides when the line has been crossed? Apparently God himself isn't always sure. When Acher died, the Talmud says, the Heavenly Court found that his sins were too serious for him to be admitted to the World to Come, but his Torah knowledge was too great for him to be sent to Gehenna. Only after his student Rabbi Meir died was the deadlock broken: Once in Heaven, Meir asked God to send his old teacher to hell, and the request must have been granted, because smoke began to rise from Acher's grave.

According to a saying from Pirkei Avot, a disagreement deserves respect (it “will endure”) only when it is a *machloket l'shem shamayim*, an argument for the sake of Heaven. The archetype is the long-running dispute between the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai, leading sages who disagreed on many points of Jewish law. The Talmud says that the followers of Hillel and the followers of Shammai once carried on an argument for three years, until finally a *bat kol*, a voice from Heaven, settled it by declaring: “Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the halakhah is in accordance with the House of Hillel” (Eruvin 13b). This is the rule of thumb throughout the Talmud: Whenever there is a disagreement between Hillel and Shammai, the former prevails, with a few specific exceptions.



If only all Jewish disagreements could be settled by a voice from above!
But elsewhere the Talmud tells a more complicated and realistic story.

One argument between the schools of Hillel and Shammai had to do with whether a certain category of marriages was legally permitted. The exact issue is recondite, having to do with polygamy and a widow's obligation to marry her dead husband's brother, and would rarely have been encountered in real life even in ancient times. Later it became completely obsolete.

Yet the disagreement had the potential to split the Jewish people in two. If each school could not trust the halakhic status of marriages performed by the other, then the followers of Hillel had to suspect any child of the Shammai school of being a *mamzer*, the product of an illegitimate union, and vice versa. Thus the schools could not intermarry, and they would eventually develop into separate peoples.

For Reish Lakish, such a division would be sinful in and of itself. "Do not cut yourselves," says Deuteronomy 14:1, and in context it is clear that this refers to cutting or scarring the body, which is prohibited like tattooing. But Reish Lakish interprets the verse metaphorically to mean that the Jewish people should not cut itself into factions. The Talmud concludes that while the schools of Shammai and Hillel disagreed in principle on the validity of certain marriages, they didn't let it govern their actions: "The House of Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from the House of Hillel, nor did the House of Hillel refrain from marrying women from the House of Shammai" (Yevamot 14a).

The rabbis use this story to highlight the importance of the prophet Zechariah's injunction to "Love truth and peace." But the problem with disagreements about sacred matters is that at a certain point, we are forced to choose which we love more, truth or peace. There is nothing more thrilling to a certain type of mind than sacrificing peace to truth, declaring that on this or that matter of religion or politics, no compromise is possible. When the Diet of Worms called on Martin Luther to recant his heretical statements about the Cath-

olic Church, he famously replied, “Here I stand; I can do no other.”

Rabbinic Judaism, by contrast, goes to great lengths to avoid having to choose between truth and peace. Its genius for disagreement fosters a genius for compromise and legal fictions. Rabbi Shimon, for instance, says that the dispute between Hillel and Shammai was not resolved by a divine voice, or by each side setting aside its scruples about marriage. Rather, the two schools avoided an open breach using behind-the-scenes diplomacy. When a man from the House of Hillel wanted to marry a woman from the House of Shammai, and the authorities of Shammai knew that the woman would be considered illegitimate under Hillel’s interpretation of the law, the Shammai-ites would privately “notify” the Hillel-ites, so the engagement could be called off without publicity.

Perhaps it was their willingness to put Jewish unity ahead of their own beliefs that allowed Hillel and Shammai to argue “for the sake of Heaven.” For the rabbis of the Talmud knew firsthand how disastrous it could be when the Jewish people were “cut” into factions. They were living in the aftermath of the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66–70 C.E., which culminated in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the massacre and exile of hundreds of thousands of Jews.

In *The Jewish War*, the first-century historian Josephus blames the suicidal rebellion on a faction of Zealots who rejected the accommodationist policies of the priesthood, the Jewish establishment. The revolt began with a disagreement on a ritual matter: A Gentile from Caesarea offered a pagan sacrifice inside the Temple, and the Jews were split on how to respond to the sacrilege. “The sober and moderate part of the Jews thought it proper to have recourse to their governors,” Josephus writes, “while the seditious part, and such as were in the fervor of their youth, were vehemently inflamed to fight.” Then as now, it is the young who rush to declare “I can do no other,” perhaps because it is harder for them to imagine just how bad the consequences might be. Many

Zealots who insisted on fighting for the honor of God's Temple ended up stabbing their own wives and children to death in Masada seven years later.



In the ancient world, Jewish disagreements could be for the sake of Heaven because they were disagreements about means, not ends. The Zealots and the priests, Hillel and Shammai, all believed they were carrying out the commandments of the God of the Torah, though they differed on what He wanted.

With the rise of secular modernity, a new dimension of disagreement opened up. For the first time, it became possible to argue that the interests of the Jewish people and the commandments of God did not always coincide. They might even be opposed. Perhaps the Jewish people could flourish spiritually only by casting off halakhah and redefining Judaism as an ethical creed, as the Reform movement did in Germany. Perhaps the dignity and survival of the Jewish people made it necessary to create a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, as the Zionists argued.

For traditional Jews in the 19th century, these disagreements did not count as arguments for the sake of Heaven. The secularists were Other, like the dualist heresy of Acher, and merited only contempt. But in the 20th century, and especially after the Holocaust, the vast majority of Jews came to accept these heretical ideas. For generations of American Jews, being Jewish has meant supporting the Jewish state and forging some compromise between Jewish tradition and modern conscience, on issues ranging from Sabbath observance to gay marriage.

Divisions between Reform and Conservative Jews, or between political liberals and conservatives, were not exactly arguments for

the sake of Heaven — they didn't even agree that there was a Heaven. But they could be called *machlokot l'shem am Yisrael*, disagreements for the sake of the Jewish people. And so, heated as they became, they did not cut the people in two. By contrast, there was a real division between most Jews and the Haredim, who placed the will of Heaven, as they construed it, above the well-being of the Jewish people, whether that meant assimilation in America or army service in Israel.

In religious debates for the sake of Heaven, those who denied Judaism were Acher, Other. That doesn't mean they were wrong. Perhaps there really are two authorities in Heaven, as Elisha ben Abuya thought. Some early Christian heretics would have agreed with him, and so would Persian believers in Zoroastrianism, for whom the two authorities were not God and Metatron but Ahura Mazda, the source of wisdom and goodness, and Angra Mainyu, his destructive adversary. It is simply that an argument for two Gods, or a Trinity, or a whole pantheon, cannot be made within Judaism, only against Judaism. And notably, such an argument does not, in the words of Pirkei Avot, endure in Jewish thought.

By the same token, if modern Judaism is defined by its concern for the well-being of the Jewish people, then an argument against the well-being of the Jewish people cannot be a Jewish argument. Put another way, a disagreement over whether or not Jewish peoplehood ought to be preserved is not one worthy of Jewish respect, and it therefore will not endure in Judaism. In relation to Judaism, it is Other. And there is a modern tradition of Jews proudly embracing that Otherness. Spinoza, Marx, Freud, Rosa Luxemburg—all agreed that scientific truth and moral virtue are universal, and that concern for any particular people, especially one's own, is unworthy. During World War I, Luxemburg wrote to a friend from her German prison cell that she had no interest in Jewish welfare (*chas v'shalom!*): “I am just as much concerned with

the poor victims on the rubber plantations of Putumayo, the black people in Africa with whose corpses the Europeans play catch. . . . I have no special place in my heart for the [Jewish] ghetto. I feel at home in the entire world wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears.”

Hannah Arendt’s thoughts and feelings about Jewishness were more complex and contradictory than Luxemburg’s, but when Gershom Scholem accused her of lacking *ahavat Yisrael*, “love of the Jewish people,” she didn’t just acknowledge the charge but embraced it: “How right you are that I have no such love. . . . I have never in my life ‘loved’ some nation or collective.” For Arendt, loving one’s own people was simply an alibi for self-love: “Love for the Jews would seem suspect to me, since I am Jewish myself.”



These examples suggest a way we can think about today’s debates over Israel and Zionism. A disagreement among Jews is a Jewish disagreement insofar as both sides are committed to the well-being of the Jewish people. This commitment needn’t be exclusive; Jewish ethics have always insisted on balancing the obligation to oneself with the obligation to others. As Hillel famously said, we must ask both “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” and “If I am only for myself, what am I?”

Anti-Zionists tend to focus on the second question and scorn the first. But Hillel recognized that self-assertion and self-defense are not merely selfishness; they are themselves moral obligations. Jewish history amply teaches that when Jews do not or cannot act for ourselves, no one else will be for us.

Since Israel is the only Jewish country in the world and approximately one-half of the world’s Jews live there, it follows that a Jewish argument must be concerned for Israel’s safety and survival. Of

course, some anti-Zionists argue that the moral and even physical well-being of Israeli Jews would be better served by a binational state. This, too, can be a disagreement for the sake of Heaven, even if the anti-Zionist side of it is thoroughly unconvincing.

But when an argument displays no genuine and realistic concern for the Jewish people—when it is animated solely by abstract ethical concerns, or sympathy for Palestinian suffering, or animus against the Israeli government—then it doesn't exist *within* Jewish peoplehood but stands *outside* of Jewish peoplehood, even if a Jew is making it. Such critics do not practice what the political philosopher Michael Walzer calls “connected criticism,” the kind that comes from within a community and wants to improve it. Indeed, for some of them, the main purpose of speaking out on Jewish issues is precisely to advertise their lack of connection—to show the world that they are ashamed of the Jewish people or the Jewish state, and should not be held responsible for it. But as history shows, and as we are learning again in our own day, enemies of the Jews do not make such fine distinctions. *