

# FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN

HOW TO CREATE A SPIRITUAL HOME FOR ALL IN A TIME OF POLARIZATION

## TORAH BLESSING

### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

#### Source Texts:

In the sermon, Rabbi Buchdahl suggests that “arguments for the sake of heaven are also a Jewish value.” This concept – in Hebrew a “*makhloket l’shem shamayim*” – is mentioned in the Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* 5:7<sup>1</sup>:

What is a *makhloket l’shem shamayim* [a dispute for the sake of heaven]? Such as was the dispute between Hillel and Shammai.

Hillel and Shammai were the heads of two competing schools of thought around the first century CE. They and their followers (referred to as “Beit Hillel” and “Beit Shammai”) often disagreed vehemently and came to opposite conclusions about essential matters of Jewish law.

However, our tradition says the following about these rival factions:

Although Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed, Beit Shammai did not, nevertheless abstain from marrying women of the families of Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying those of Beit Shammai. This is to teach you that they showed love and friendship towards one another.

...

For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. [One group] said: “The law is in accordance with our opinion,” and the other said: “The law is in accordance with our opinion.” Ultimately a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: “Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the law is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.”

Since both these and those [opinions] are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the law established in accordance with their opinion? The

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<sup>1</sup> The Mishnah is a compilation of Jewish oral tradition, which was codified around the year 200 CE. *Pirkei Avot* is a section of the Mishnah that collects in pithy statements the wisdom of the Rabbis regarding how to live a good life.

reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the law they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai.<sup>2</sup>

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) What do you imagine led our sages to conclude that the arguments between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai were “for the sake of heaven”?
- (b) What do these texts suggest about how we should interact with those with whom we disagree?
- (c) In our modern world, how would you distinguish between arguments that are “for the sake of heaven” and those that are not?

Rabbi Buchdahl asserts that one important Jewish value is giving one another “*kaf zechut*” -- the benefit of the doubt. We see this value expressed in another passage in *Pirkei Avot* (1:6):

Yehoshua ben Perahia says: Make for yourself a teacher [or “mentor”]; acquire for yourself a friend; and judge every person with *kaf zechut* -- a presumption of merit.

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) What does it mean to judge someone with a presumption of merit (or to give them the “benefit of the doubt”)?
- (b) Are Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perahia’s three exhortations related in any way? What might obtaining a mentor and a friend have to do with giving others the benefit of the doubt?
- (c) Does everyone deserve the benefit of the doubt?
- (d) If you were to try more often to judge others with a presumption of merit, how would that change your behavior?

**From the sermon:**

*Rabbi Buchdahl writes:*

Central’s primary purpose is this: to be a spiritual home. For all our members. Our priorities are to care for those who are sick or struggling, comfort our mourners, educate our children, seed and sustain a love for Israel, celebrate our milestones and observe Shabbat and the seasons of our Jewish calendar. Our synagogue is uniquely privileged to share in these holy acts which form the sacred fabric of our Jewish lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eruvin 13b.

But as the Talmud says: “One must always pray in a House that has windows:” our spiritual home also cannot separate us from the world outside the glass. Torah calls us to live out our values in the world. . . . Some Jewish values are so clear that our spiritual home will be compromised if we stand idly by and do not act.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What does it mean for Central Synagogue to be a “spiritual home for all our members”?
- (b) To what extent must the synagogue be comfortable for everyone? To what extent is it appropriate for our leaders to create discomfort that will spur us to act?
- (c) Is the ideal of creating a spiritual home for all compatible with “living our values in the world?”
- (d) Do you agree that there are values that are “so clear that our spiritual home will be compromised if we stand idly by and do not act”? If so, which values fit this category? And what damage would be inflicted if we were to refrain from acting?