

## **“The Jewish Candidates”**

**Rosh Hashana D2, 5777**

**October 4, 2016**

**Rabbi Steven Saks**

I was recently posed this question by the *Jewish Voice*: “Has there ever been a Jewish candidate?” A record number of Americans are dissatisfied with the candidates and the harsh tenor of the campaign. Perhaps they would be happier if the candidates were Hillel and Shammai. During the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E. these rabbinic titans competed for leadership. Yet, despite this competition, their age is considered a golden age of harmony. Despite their disagreements, they acted with friendship towards each other so much so that their sons and daughters would even marry each other.

How could such peace be achieved despite their disagreement on crucial points of law? The answer is quite simple. Bartenura (15<sup>th</sup> century commentator) explains that Hillel’s and Shammai’s arguments were *L’ Shem Shamayim* (for the sake of heaven). In other words, they were not concerned with “winning.” Rather, they thirsted for truth even if it came from the lips of an adversary. Conversely, one who is more concerned with “winning” rather than discovering the truth argues not *L’Shem Shamayim* but for his own glory.

Korach is the classic example of someone who argued solely to win. He was a power-hungry demagogue who claimed that he only desired to lift up a downtrodden people. He skillfully accused Moses and Aaron of monopolizing power at the nation's expense in an attempt to depose them and seize power himself. Our sages consider Korach to be a brilliant man. How could he have made the foolish mistake of accusing Moses and Aaron of usurping power despite the fact they clearly led at God's behest? Korach's relentless ambition caused him to suffer cognitive dissonance. Though he had the intellectual capability to understand that Moses and Aaron were God's chosen leaders, his ambition would not allow him to accept it. Instead, he ignored the information which he found inconvenient, thus permitting himself to believe that he was the rightful leader. Unfortunately, his blind ambition led to his destruction.

Today's question is: "Have we fallen into the same trap as Korach by simply tuning out the information we don't want to hear?" The National Academy of Science published a 2014 article on "Political Motive Asymmetry," which psychologists explain is the phenomenon of assuming that *your* ideology is based on love, while your opponent's is based on hate. The article claims that a majority of political active people actually believe that while their intentions are benevolent, those with whom they disagree are malicious.

From this perspective it is easy to see why the political climate has become so divisive. Instead of viewing political opponents as people who believe that a different path should be taken to reach

the shared goal of social wellbeing, we view opponents as villains whose view should be ignored and aims must be thwarted. The problem with this mentality is obvious. Our inability to consider other perspectives confines us to an echo chamber replete with blind spots.

God demonstrates that this type of situation is untenable. After God creates Adam he declares, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make an *ezer k’negdo* (a helpmate opposed to him). How can she be a helpmate if she is opposed to him? She sounds like someone who will cause strife. The *Talmud* suggests that originally man and woman were created back to back, attached at the tail bone. Why did God detach them if he wanted them to reunite in marriage? Because when they stood back to back, they could not communicate and not share differing perspectives. Man’s solitude only comes to an end when he is exposed to someone of a differing perspective from whom he can learn.

Although we believe our views to be correct, we should entertain the possibility that our opponent’s views, too, can have merit. How can opposing views simultaneously have merit? Again we look to Hillel and Shammai.

After *Bet Hillel* (the House of Hillel) and *Bet Shammai* (the House of Shammai) debated a law regarding the *Sukkah* for three years, a heavenly voice finally rang out, exclaiming that the utterances of “both were the words of the living God, though the law is established according to *Bet Hillel*.” The obvious question is how

could *Bet Hillel's* view be favored if both views are God's words? But before we address that question, we should note that the law was established according to *Bet Hillel* because *Bet Hillel* would study *Bet Shammai's* rulings and even mention *Bet Shammai's* rulings before their own. Notice the *Talmud* is not saying that *Bet Hillel* won the debate on the merit of the argument; *Bet Hillel* won because of the ability to listen to the other side.

So now let's turn to the question of how *Bet Shammai's* rulings can also be the divine word? Though *Bet Hillel's* ruling were appropriate for their generation, *Bet Shammai's* rulings are preserved in the event that should a future generation have reason to revisit an issue, they will be able to consult both views and choose the one which is most appropriate for their era. The *Ari* takes it a step further, commenting that *Bet Hillel's* rulings are often followed in this world because they are generally more lenient and thus applicable to an imperfect world. However, in the Messianic era of worldly perfection we will follow *Bet Shammai's* rulings, which represent the ultimate in conformity to the divine will. *Bet Shammai's* rulings teach us that sometimes an idea is ahead of its time and simply needs to be preserved until we are ready for it.

Let's look at a case in point. There have been several well-intended Israeli-Palestinian peace plans that have been proposed over the years. Often the problem is not the plan itself, but the fact that the Palestinians have still not made peace with the idea of a

Jewish state. These plans should be preserved so that, God willing, in the future when the Palestinians are ready to make peace, a version of one of these plans can be implemented. And though Korach was motivated by personal ambition, his idea of lifting up the congregation had merit. In time, lay people would become empowered, but the idea was not appropriate during this nascent stage of national development.

Our goal in our personal and political interactions should be to try to catch ourselves when we slip into “Korach mode” and start tuning out opposing views. Yet, there are some whose views so vile that are simply beyond the pale of decency and should not be dignified. As historian Deborah Lipstadt stated regarding Holocaust denial, “There are **not** two sides to every issue.” We should not elevate hate mongering to the level of legitimate discourse.

That being said, generally speaking we should view our opponents as “helpmates” who provide us with lenses into our blind spots.

In answer to the question “Is there ever a Jewish candidate?” I will answer by suggesting that what is more important than determining the question of “Is there ever a Jewish candidate?” is that we have candidates who are willing to learn from the example of civil discourse that Judaism provides. Our candidates and electorate need to be reminded that the vast majority of those with whom we disagree are not nefarious; they, too, want the best for our country, only they believe that different means should be used to

achieve that end. We achieve *Shalom* (peace) by endeavoring to become *Shalem* (complete). It is not an accident that *Shalom* and *Shalem* sound similar, they share the same root for a reason. Our views only become completely informed when we open our mind and are willing to listen. Twice a day we Jews declare *Shema Yisrael* (Hear O Israel). We Americans need to begin declaring “Hear O” America” so we can again become accustomed to listening to each other.