

## ***Korach 2018***

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 6/16/18

As many of you know, I had the honor and privilege of giving the opening prayer in the U.S. Congress last week. It was an awe-inspiring experience to stand on that historic stage and I am grateful to my congressman, Donald Norcross for giving me this great honor. People ask me if I was nervous, and the answer is "no." Excited? Yes. Nervous? No. I was limited to 150 words that had to be submitted a week in advance. All I needed to do was read my prayer. It wasn't scary at all. I ended up editing my initial draft down to 195 words, and no one seemed to complain. Still, today I want to share with you a bit of what I did not say...

What I did say was, "Help the Members of this Congress to be ever mindful to the fact that the right to disagree is fundamental to our democracy. Foster in them the Art of Disagreement that the Jewish People have been practicing for millennia." But I wanted to say, "The right to disagree is fundamental to our democracy and I stand before you today representing a faith that is schooled in the Art of Disagreement. The Talmud, our sacred code of Jewish Law, is in essence one long, impassioned argument as to what is best for individuals, and for humanity." I wanted to put the Talmud in as a way of emphasizing to those listening and watching that we Jews argue. It's what we do. And, therefore, our sacred texts, especially the Talmud, are composed largely of arguments. I wanted to say that the Talmudic style of debate is one that is sorely missing in public discourse today.

There is nothing wrong with having disagreements with another person and airing them. People will always have differences; there will always be important issues to argue about. The frank and respectful exchanging of views and differences is an important part of building and maintaining healthy relationships, far more so than just rolling your eyes, or swallowing your thoughts and opinions. But what matters in Judaism is why the argument is undertaken and how it is conducted. Had I had more time before Congress, I would have further explained that the Talmud famously teaches, *"Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven will ultimately endure, and one which is not for the sake of Heaven will not ultimately endure. What is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? This is a debate between Hillel and Shammai. What is a dispute not for the sake of Heaven? This is the dispute of Korach and his assembly."*

I would have said to Congress, "So argue all you want, but do so for the Sake of Heaven." An argument for the sake of Heaven is one undertaken for the sake of truth. An argument not for the sake of Heaven is one that is undertaken for the sake of victory. Who debated solely for victory? Korach in our portion read today. He wanted to make Moses look bad and to rally the People against him. He wanted to crush Moses. But Hillel and Shammai, (who lived in the first century CE) as well as the students who followed them, they debated for the Sake of Heaven. In many ways their approaches to life fundamentally differed. But both parties had the same goal - understanding and following Gd's will. Nonetheless, they saw each other not as antagonists but as partners in this lofty mission. Their disagreements forced each of them to clarify and defend his own position. In this way, even though they disagreed, they complemented rather than contrasted one another.

Their mutual respect was reflected in their behavior towards one another as well. Regarding the schools of Hillel and Shammai, the Mishna writes that even though they had many basic

disagreements regarding marriage and forms of ritual uncleanness (affecting food and utensils), their students and their families married one another and borrowed utensils from each other, too. They respected the others' right to disagree, harboring no illusions that they possessed the only valid approach to understanding Gd's Torah.

Rabbi Yochanan was one of the foremost sages of the Talmud. His study partner and almost incessant critic was a scholar named Reish Lakish. You can scarcely get through a page in the Talmud without encountering an argument between these two adversaries. Yet when Reish Lakish passed away, R. Yochanan was despondent. So a new study partner was found for him, who in spite of his great learning, turned out to be a "yes man." R. Yochanan couldn't enjoy his studies with this new partner. He said, "In the old days everything I would say Reish Lakish would challenge with 24 questions - and I would counter with 24 answers - and the topic was naturally broadened and enhanced. This scholar, however, brings proofs for everything I say!" The great debates of R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish did nothing but bring them closer.

One final point worth remembering: Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish, Hillel and Shammai all lived in a time of great political and economic uncertainty. The Roman persecutions made people look for easy answers and an easy way out. But instead of getting on each other's backs, instead of arguing for an easy victory, our Sages fought for the Sake of Heaven, for the loftiest ideals, for a better shared future. Korach took advantage of a time of great uncertainty. The People were unsure of their future, and they too were looking for easy answers. In times of great uncertainty we all are tempted by easy answers, and we can all fall prey to fear. But we, the Jewish People, the People who have modeled this art of disagreement, must live lives that are modeled on our sacred texts. We must always be the People of the Book. We may read it differently, but we must recognize that when we argue solely to win, then both parties lose. Let our victories come in moving forward together, whether it is in Congress, in our shul, in our community, or in our homes.