

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parsha Beha'alotcha

Rules of Conflict

The very first Machloket, argument, between two valid rabbinical opinions to ever take place in Jewish history has a tremendous lesson to teach us. The dispute was regarding whether one could lean and confess on a sacrificial animal (the process of placing one's hands upon it to pronounce confession before offering it as a sacrifice) on a Jewish holiday. Shamai maintained that it was prohibited and Hillel allowed it.

The Argument

The Talmud (Tractate Beitza 20b) tells a story that a student of Hillel came to the Beit HaMikdash, Temple, on a holiday and began to lean on an animal as his teacher Hillel allowed. A student of Shamai attempted to start an argument and yelled, "מה זה סמיכה?" "what's this leaning?!" The student of Hillel, in an effort to end the confrontation, replied abruptly, "מה זה?" "what's some silence (meaning: I will not fight; you know that our teachers have different opinions)!" The conversation ended. A talmudic sage then goes on to comment that we can learn from this story: Whenever one is insulted he may answer back the same amount of words as he was accused.

Deeper Lesson

Rabbi Shimshon Pincus (1945 - 2001) zt"l extrapolates upon this and explains the beauty of the lesson. When one is in an argument, human nature is to bring up all past complaints and grievances against the competitor. This in turn fuels the fire of discord even more. However, when one sticks to the topic of discussion and keeps the response relevant, one can prevent the fight from escalating. Rabbi Pincus points out that the gauge that shows whether one is taking a dispute too far is: how much he remains on topic. One that brings up past grievances is usually lacking in proper intent. If one pulls away the dam, and lets the insults fly, this acts as fuel to the fire, instead of opting for a constructive discussion. If one is upset with the mess on the table, is that reason to yell at the culprit and express to them every negative thought ever felt about them from years past?! One who wishes to reach a resolution should stay away from personal attacks and keep the discussion respectful and focused. Hillel's student made sure not to fan the fires while at the same time defended himself with an appropriate rebuttal.



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Our Reading

I believe that this great lesson is expressed in our parsha as well. Eldad and Maydad were prophets who began to publicize the fact that Moses would die and Joshua would take over. Joshua felt insulted for the honor of Moses who was in front of them. He felt that they should be quieted! The verse (11:26) which describes their prophecy, and thus the insult of Moses, contains twenty words. The next two verses (11:26-7) which contain the response to the insult contain the exact same amount, twenty words!

There is more. At the end of the parsha, Miriam spoke lashon hara, slander, against her brother, Moses. The verse that describes this incident (12:1) contains exactly ten words. Miriam was punished with tzarat, a spiritual malady with physical symptoms, for her misdeed. When Moses found out that Miriam had uttered words against him, he forgave her on the spot and prayed for her speedy recovery. Instead of offering her rebuke, the verse describes his response that contains precisely ten words. It reads, "Moshe cried out to Hashem "Please Hashem, please cure her!" A selfless and caring brother! That is how he chose to use his words!

Great Timing

One more beautiful addition to this is that it was here specifically that the Jews waited seven days before traveling further. They were waiting for Miriam to be allowed back into the camp. She got this reward as recognition for her kind deed of years ago when she waited near baby Moses to ensure that he remained safe while floating in the Nile river. Why did Miriam receive reward for this specifically here?

Human nature is that when someone does something against us, we can easily forget about any good that they have ever provided us with. One would think that Miriam should be left alone at this point as a punishment for speaking against Moses. We should forget about her good deeds toward Moses. The Torah shows and stresses to us, that on the contrary, it is exactly at this time of distraction and disagreement that we strive to conjure up the integrity to recognize and thank those that deserve our gratitude. This is true greatness.

Shabbat Shalom!

