

Debate For The Sake Of Heaven
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Jewish tradition speaks of two types of debate. Healthy debate is conducted *leshem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven. Healthy debate is characterized by honesty, sincerity, and mutual respect. Unhealthy debate is conducted *lo leshem shamayim*, not for the sake of heaven. Unhealthy debate is characterized by dishonesty, insincerity, and disrespect. Our Rabbis associate heavenly debate, debate *leshem shamayim*, with Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai. While they famously disagreed with one another all the time, they and their academies still were friendly with each other and saw merit in each other's point of view.

What our beloved country needs is heavenly debate, debate conducted in the spirit of *leshem shamayim*. The financial crisis that is wrecking our economy serves to underscore our nation's need for a reinvigorated political process in which the most urgent and compelling issues of our day are openly and honestly debated and corrective action is taken.

Unfortunately, our current political system rarely addresses the real issues head on. Simplistic sound bites are preferred to serious discussion of the merits of one policy over another. Systemic problems are evaded. Systematic solutions are avoided in favor of short-term BandAids.

Like so many elections before it, the 2008 presidential election has become all about the character assassination of the opponent. Why just a few weeks ago, one of the presidential campaign managers actually boasted that this presidential election is not about the issues. This is not heavenly debate. This is not debate conducted *leshem shamayim*.

As we all know, our political system is corrupted by the money of lobbyists, special interest groups, and other donors who curry favor with Democrats and Republicans alike, to whom our elected officials are beholden. This is unheavenly debate, debate conducted *lo leshem shamayim*.

Our political process is unduly influenced by the independent 527 groups, both liberal and conservative, who put out provocative and inflammatory messages on television, in mailboxes, and through the internet, and yet operate outside campaign finance rules and with little accountability. This is unheavenly debate, debate conducted *lo leshem shamayim*.

To me, the most upsetting and disturbing aspect of our political process is its deliberate lack of truthfulness. Millions of dollars worth of television ads traffic in half-truths,

untruths and sly innuendos. Candidates make claims and accusations that they fully know to be misleading, untrue, or downright false. Their speeches are rife with contradictory promises, hoping the public will not notice. How many times have you heard a candidate say, “This is not the time to fix blame,” and then proceed to fix blame on his or her opponent?

Indeed, the greatest faux pas in politics is candor. Journalist Michael Kinsley changed Washington’s understanding of gaffes with his observation that “they occur not when people lie, but when they say what they really think.” Perhaps you too have noticed that most elected officials tell us what they really think about the issues only when they leave office.

With the presidential election only one month away, and the political pundits and spinmeisters on all sides working hard to win our vote for their candidate, the Torah contains an important, cautionary tale for us to hear. It is the story of Korach.

Korach led a rebellion against the leadership and authority of Moses and Aaron. Korach and his followers argued that every Israelite should be accorded the status and prerogatives of the priesthood, not just Aaron and his sons. Many Israelites supported Korach and his followers. They honestly believed that Korach’s rebellion was fighting the good fight for them.

Only later, after much damage had been done, did the Israelite people come to understand that Korach’s rebellion was not for them and had never been about them. You see, Korach’s father and Moses and Aaron’s father were brothers. Korach, Aaron, and Moses were all cousins. What Korach wanted was the very same political and spiritual power and status that Moses and Aaron enjoyed. Korach’s rebellion was all about Korach and his resentment of his place within the Levite clan.

But Korach and his followers hid their true motives from the people. They conned the people into believing their intentions were good ones, to bring every Israelite a share of priestly and political power. But their real intention was to take all the power for themselves and to manipulate the masses into helping them achieve it.

In the end Korach’s illegitimate coup d’etat against the leadership of Moses and Aaron resulted in disastrous consequences. Looking back at this painful episode in Jewish history, our Rabbis declared that Korach is the symbol of unhealthy and unheavenly debate, debate that is conducted *lo leshem shamayim*.

What’s the moral of the Korach story?

Like all those who trusted Korach, we too tend to hear in the candidates’ speeches what we want to hear, what we hope to hear, not what they actually said. As informed voters, we must look beyond the publicly stated agendas of our presidential candidates. It behooves us to assess critically their private agendas, their true intentions, and their ultimate allegiances.

The story of Korach teaches us that we must not permit ourselves to be swayed by campaign tactics of fear and smear. You can check out the truth of the candidates' accusations against each other by logging on to non-partisan websites such as politifact.com or factcheck.org. Wouldn't the Hebrews have liked to have those?

The story of Korach cautions us when it comes to politics, we must not be naïve. It's never just about the issues themselves. It is important for us to know who sits in the candidates' inner circles and to whom do they have financial ties? It's important for us to know who are the candidates' advisors and what are their conflicts of interest?

We read in *Pirkei Avot*, the ethics of the fathers, “which debate was for the sake of heaven? The debate between Hillel and Shammai. Which debate was not for the sake of heaven? The debate of Korach and his followers.”

Our Rabbis teach that we should expect candidates for the presidency of the United States of America to run campaigns and debate each other in the spirit of *leshem shamayim* – characterized by honesty, sincerity, and mutual respect -- and never settle for less.