

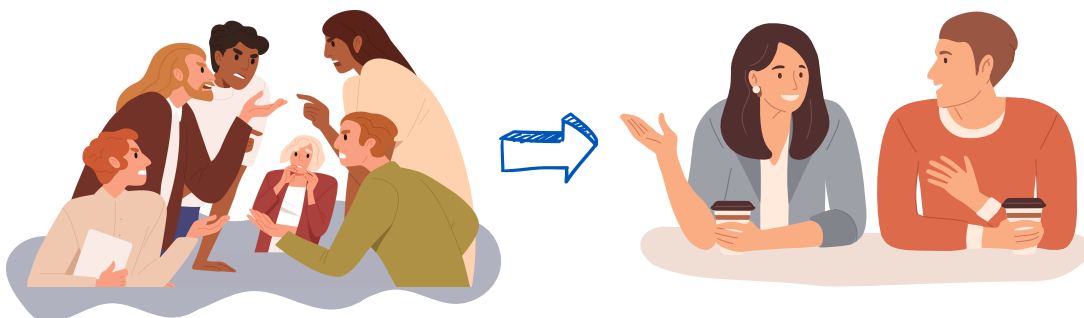
YOUR GUIDE TO “ARGUMENTS FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN”

In Jewish tradition, arguments with a shared goal are holy and called “arguments for the sake of heaven!”

Every argument that is for [the sake of] heaven's name, it is destined to endure. But if it is not for [the sake of] heaven's name -- it is not destined to endure. What is [an example of an argument] for [the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Hillel and Shammai. What is [an example of an argument] not for [the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Korach and all of his congregation. (Pirkei Avot 5:17)

Commenting on this Mishnah, the 16th century rabbinic scholar, Bartenura, explained, **“In an argument for the sake of Heaven, the purpose and aim that is sought from that argument is to arrive at the truth, and this endures; like that which they said, “From a dispute the truth will be clarified,” And in an argument which is not for the sake of Heaven, its desired purpose is to achieve power and the love of contention, and its end will not endure.”**

Engaging in spirited debate conveys that both sides believe in the goal and care enough to fight for it. But shared goals don't always mean constructive conversations, and a destructive conversation can have negative ramifications on your mental health. The Talmud is replete with descriptions of spirited debates between chavrutot (learning partners), some of which serve as models for how we can benefit from healthy, spirited debate.



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In Tractate Ta’anit, the sages offer reflections on Torah study and the need for a chavruta.



Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, asked, “What is the meaning of that which is written: Iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend? (Proverbs 27:17) This verse comes to tell you that just as with these iron implements, one sharpens the other when they are rubbed against each other, so too, when Torah scholars study together, they sharpen one another in Jewish law.” (Taanit 7a:8-10)

The sages emphasize the impact of caring, goal-oriented debate on participants’ growth. But there are also stories in the Talmud that present models of unhealthy and destructive dynamics which lead to tragedy.

One of the Talmud’s most famous learning partners was Rabbi Yohanon and Reish Lakish, who began learning together after the former convinced the latter to leave a life of crime and become a scholar. Their relationship came to a tragic end, which the Talmud attributes to Rabbi Yohanon’s emotional insensitivity, as he taunted Reish Lakish about his past life as a criminal. On one occasion during one halachic discussion about weaponry, Rabbi Yohanon referenced Reish Lakish’s expertise on weapons given his past — upsetting Reish Lakish.

Reish Lakish asked Rabbi Yoḥanan, “What benefit did you provide me by bringing me close to Torah? There, among the bandits, they called me leader of the bandits, here, too, they call me leader of the bandits. Rabbi Yoḥanan replied, “I provided benefit to you, as I brought you close to God, under the wings of the Divine Presence. (Bava Metzia 84a)

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On its own, a minor insult wouldn't reflect emotional insensitivity. It could have even been a learning moment for Rabbi Yohanan, had he taken the time to understand Reish Lakish's feelings. Instead, Rabbi Yohanan deflected with a tongue-in-cheek response, failing to acknowledge his friend's pain — a moment that would deeply wound them both.

As a result of the quarrel, Rabbi Yohanan was offended, which in turn affected Reish Lakish, who fell ill...Ultimately, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, (Reish Lakish's Full Name), died. (Bava Metzia 84a)

This story reflects what modern psychology also affirms: mental anguish, when intense, can affect physical health. And here, the consequences were tragic. But the story's ultimate conclusion is even more tragic, because it highlights what is really at stake when we approach dialogue and collaboration carelessly: true connection. Once Reish Lakish passed away, Rabbi Yohanan was assigned a new chavruta, but nobody could replace his old friend, whose skillful debate made Rabbi Yohanan's own skills sharper and their relationship deeper.

Rabbi Yohanan was sorely pained over losing him...[Speaking to his new chavruta, he asked,] “Are you comparable to the son of Lakish? In my discussions with the son of Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the halakha by itself would become broadened and clarified. And yet you say to me, ‘There is a ruling which is taught that supports your opinion.’” (Bava Metzia 84a)

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With his anguish over the loss of Reish Lakish, Rabbi Yohanan passed away. While the benefits of dialogue are reasonably intuitive, one must recognize the dangers of destructive and thoughtless dialogue, even when discussing issues that are objectively positive.

Had the two of them thought more deeply about how they engaged with one another, this tragedy could have been avoided. Debate remains central to Jewish life and learning — but so too must sensitivity. Here are **three** tips to ensure your arguments for the sake of heaven stay that way.

Be aware of your biases - It's impossible to be completely objective. The best communicators can work with and around their own thoughts and beliefs rather than ignore them.



Manage and care for your emotions - Difficult conversations come with many emotions that can affect us in different ways without us realizing it. Without taking the time to check in with your feelings and having the space to ask for a pause, we can walk away from conversations hurt — regardless of the conclusion that's reached. Be cognizant of the language you use and the manner you speak in, avoiding any triggers you might not be thinking about. Sharing our emotions as well as validating those of others maintains a healthy and productive atmosphere.



Set expectations - Charged topics can be hard to talk about. Disagreement is necessary for growth, but we can get lost in our arguments and make mistakes. We may say the wrong thing or misremember something, but if you care for one another, you need to recognize that possibility and make space for mistakes. It's okay to say “I want to discuss something important, but I might not be as clear as I want to be, or I may make a mistake.” Feeling safe takes off some of the pressure to be perfect and say how you feel.

